# the GREMLINS

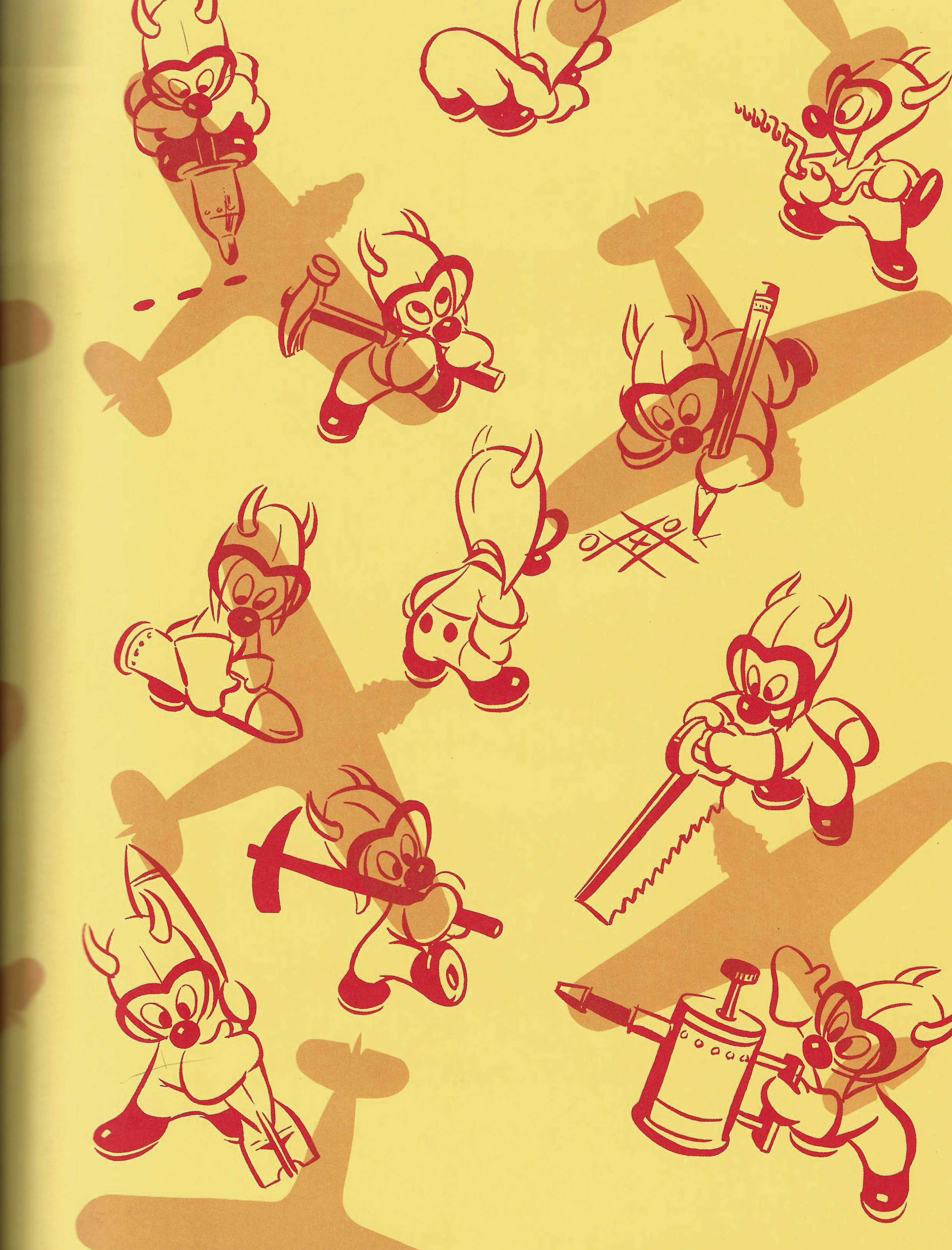
THE LOST

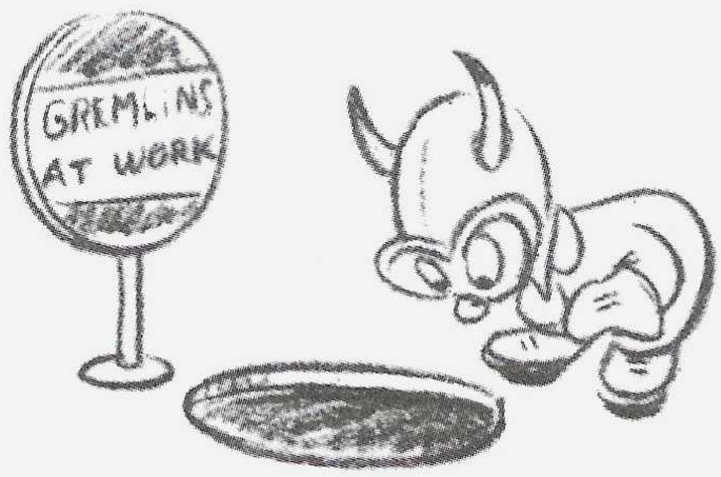
## WALT DISNEY PRODUCTION

A ROYAL AIR FORCE STORY

**By Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl**

INTRODUCTION BY LEONARD MALTIN



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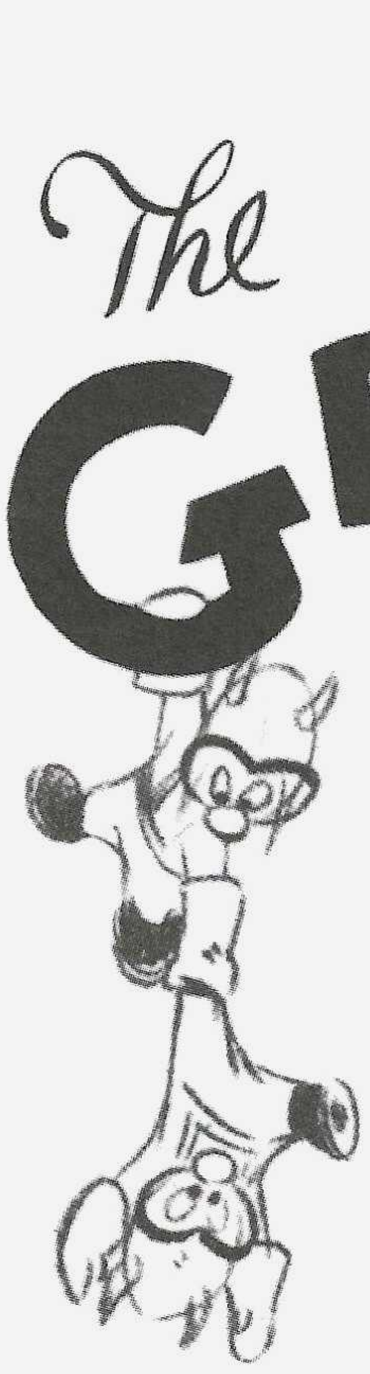

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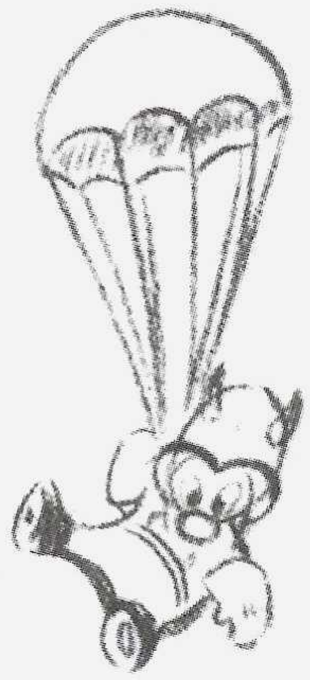

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# THE GREMLINS GOT 'EM:

## *How Walt Disney and Roald Dahl didn't get to make a movie together*

BY LEONARD MALTIN

The names Walt Disney and Roald Dahl do not automatically seem to go together, like ham and eggs or Abbott and Costello, but in the 1940s, Disney struck up partnerships with individuals as diverse as Leopold Stokowski and Salvador Dali. While Dahl's name came to be associated with stories of the macabre, he enjoyed his greatest success appealing to the same audience that Disney entertained for so many years: children.

Chance and circumstance brought these two men together, but that brief encounter yielded the book you hold in your hands: for Dahl, a milestone as his first published work; for Disney, the one tangible product of an idea that never came to fruition.

Welsh-born Roald Dahl knew sadness from an early age: one of five children, his world was shaken when his eldest sister, Astri, succumbed to an attack of appendicitis at the age of seven. His grief-stricken father died of pneumonia just two months later. Roald was only three at the time. Dahl turned his feelings inward, especially during his unhappy years at boarding school, where he was sent at the age of nine.

His experiences with grownups during his formative years never receded from the forefront of his consciousness, and decades later, when he started telling bedtime stories to his own children, he drew on those memories. Never out of touch with his inner child—he looked forward to eating a chocolate bar every day of his life—he once wrote, "Parents and schoolteachers are the enemy." This point of view infuses such books as *James and the Giant Peach, The Witches,* and *Matilda* and helps explain their popularity with youthful readers.

With the outbreak of World War II Dahl enlisted in the Royal Air Force and became a fighter pilot, battling the German Luftwaffe and surviving many dangerous missions. When, after a 1940 crash in the Sahara desert, it became clear that he could no longer fly, he was dispatched to Washington, D.C. as a military attaché at the British Embassy. Some accounts insist that he was involved in spy work along with "the man called Intrepid."

It was during this period that he began to write. He had shared stories with other RAF men about Gremlins, mythical creatures who sabotaged flights, and now he crafted a story about the tiny creatures. Before he could submit the story for publication he had to obtain approval from his superiors, and as it happened, the man who headed British Information Services in New York City was a movie producer and entrepreneur named Sidney Bernstein. (A decade later he co-founded Granada Television, and in 1969 was named a Lord.) Bernstein took it upon himself to send Dahl's story to Walt Disney.

From the moment the United States became involved in World War II, Walt Disney's studio was virtually commandeered by the Armed Forces. Walt spent the next four years producing training films and other war-related subjects, from a Donald Duck short encouraging Americans to pay their taxes on time to a cartoon in which the Seven Dwarfs instructed South Americans how to avoid malaria. Wherever possible, Disney merged these two missions together, as in the morale-boosting Donald

Duck cartoon *Der Fuehrer's Face*, which won an Academy Award, and the feature film *Victory Through Air Power.*

Dahl's story about gremlins couldn't have come at a better time. Walt immediately saw the potential for a topical film with an unusual taste of whimsy.

As Dahl recalled in his 1978 memoir *Lucky Break*, "Because of the Gremlins, I was given three weeks' leave from my duties at the Embassy in Washington and whisked out to Hollywood [in the summer of 1942]. There, I was put up at Disney's expense in a luxurious Beverly Hills hotel and given a huge shiny car to drive about in. Each day, I worked with the great Disney at his studios in Burbank, roughing out the story-line for the forthcoming film. I had a ball. I was still only twenty-six. I attended story conferences in Disney's enormous office where every word spoken, every suggestion made, was taken down by a stenographer and typed out afterwards. I mooched around the rooms where the gifted and obstreperous animators worked, the men who had already created *Snow White, Dumbo, Bambi*, and other marvelous films, and . . . when my time was up, I went back to Washington and left them to it."

Walt and his brother Roy—his lifelong business partner—knew that their first priority was to clarify ownership of the Gremlin characters. Since having Oswald the Lucky Rabbit stolen from under their noses by an unscrupulous distributor in 1928, the Disney brothers insisted on absolute control of their properties.

While Dahl claimed for the rest of his life that the creatures were his creation, evidence points to the contrary. Sources differ on whether or not the term was used during World War I, but it seems that talk of Gremlins was fairly common among RAF pilots in the early 1940s. In fact, a memo from the Disney company's Washington, D.C. sales manager Charles D. Feitel to Roy and Walt in Burbank, following Feitel's first meeting with Dahl, states, "The Gremlin characters are not creatures of his imagination as they are 'well known' by the entire RAF and as far as I can determine no individual can claim credit."

In fact, Disney fended off several individuals who staked their claims of ownership by explaining that proceeds from the film would go not to Dahl but to the RAF Benevolent Fund. This in no way discredits Dahl's charming story or his invention of the details surrounding their origins.

Walt knew that he could secure copyrights for his specific character designs, which no one else could use. Toward that end, he arranged with *Cosmopolitan* magazine (then a general-interest monthly and not the sexy women-only publication of today) to publish a "preview" of his Gremlins movie using Dahl's text in its December 1942 issue.

But long before that could come to pass, the name and notion of Gremlins became well known. It didn't take long for the name to become part of common language. Initially defined as impish creatures who wreaked havoc on British flyers in midair, the name soon took on a wider meaning. If a book or pamphlet had typographical errors in it, one could always blame it on Gremlins who gummed up the works.

Meanwhile, Disney and his staff were having trouble settling on the designs for his characters—and a story. The biggest challenge was how to preserve the original concept of the Gremlins, as perpetrators of airborne deviltry, and still make them sympathetic. One story man on the payroll at that time was Eric Knight, the author of *Lassie Come Home.* It was apparently Knight who suggested to Walt that he make a live-action film in which only the Gremlin characters would be animated. Knight left the studio at the end of the year, having contributed substantially to the project; one month later he died in an airplane crash.

The Disney-designed characters made their debut in a seven-page *Cosmopolitan* story called

"Introducing the Gremlins." The magazine called it "unquestionably the greatest contribution to living folklore in more than a hundred years. It is destined to live long after this war has been forgotten." The story carried a byline of Pegasus, identified as a noted Gremlinoligist. The editors explained, "Pegasus does not claim to be the creator of the Gremlins. Nobody really knows, he says, how the legend started."

When the story was expanded to book length and published in mid-1943 as *The Gremlins*, the text was properly attributed to Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl, although the copyright was registered by the Walt Disney Studios and the illustrations were uncredited.

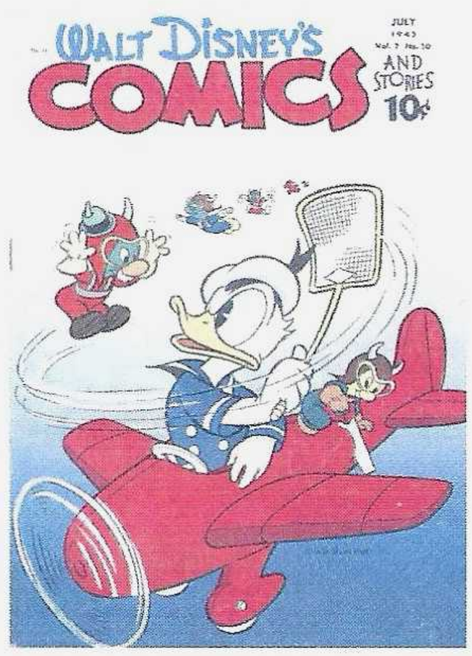
We now know that almost all of those drawings were the work of Bill Justice, a living Disney legend who started out as an in-betweener in 1937 and went on to become an animator, director, and an Imagineer.

In his autobiography *Justice for Disney*, Bill remembers Dahl as a ladies' man, and recalls that work for the prospective feature "dragged on and on" without coming to a satisfying conclusion.

"But the project wasn't a total loss. This was the first time I'd ever been asked to create a new cartoon character . . . Al Dempster added some full-page color paintings to my illustrations and the book *The Gremlins* was published by Random House. It was the first book I'd ever illustrated."

Walt tried to get Dahl to return to California to participate in the story development process, to no avail. (It isn't clear whether Dahl chose not to or was denied the opportunity. His later writing indicates that he was content to allow the Disney people to run with the idea. For the rest of his life he had nothing but good things to say about Walt and his experience in Burbank. Walt in turn seemed genuinely fond of Dahl, who because of his six-foot, six-inch height was nicknamed Stalky during his tenure at the studio.) In early 1943 Disney revealed that he was no longer going to combine animation and live-action, but was planning a traditional cartoon feature.

This was a definite film in progress. The cover of the Random House book bore the slogan "from the Walt Disney Production." Merchandising began in earnest for the characters to whet the public's appetite for the film. Lucky collectors might still turn up a Widget hand puppet, a jigsaw puzzle, or one of Charlotte Clark's handmade dolls of Fifinella (the female Gremlin), Gremlin Gus, and a Widget (a Gremlin child). The creatures turned up in a Life Savers magazine ad and a Disney coloring book. There were even Gremlins pages in the *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* comic books, written and drawn in many cases by Walt Kelly.




*Donald Duck has his hands full with Gremlin Gus and company. From* Walt Disney's Comics and Stories *#34, July 1943. Art by Walt Kelly.*

Animation historian Jim Korkis, who has conducted exhaustive research on this project, has written, "The Disney Studio developed at least two complete scripts. [One] version apparently expanded Dahl's story by having the Gremlins defeat their own little Hitler before they could help the RAF fight the real Hitler. One sequence would have had Hitler 'sputtering a flood of unintelligible German' as he complains to Goebbels and Göring that British newspapers have been giving credit to Gremlins for all the wonderful efforts done by Hitler's air force, the Luftwaffe. The session would have been interrupted by Mussolini entering 'looking pretty battered and holding his hands up sort of like an Italian chef describing a dish of spaghetti.'

"The final finished script in May 1943 more closely resembled Dahl's original story with what respected animation historian John Cawley described as 'the addition of large chunks of narration and a dose of patriotic exhortation concerning the need to join together to fight a single enemy.'"

Meanwhile, virtually every animation studio was planning a Gremlins cartoon. Since he could not claim ownership of the idea itself, Roy Disney approached each rival on a gentlemanly basis and asked if they would scrap their projects rather than jeopardize the success of an expensive feature film. Dave Fleischer, who was then running Columbia's Screen Gems studio, was the only holdout, so Roy went over his head to Columbia management.

Leon Schlesinger of Warner Bros. explained that he already had two short subjects well into production and begged Roy's understanding. As a show of good will, he changed the titles of both films, directed by Bob Clampett. *Bugs Bunny and the Gremlin* became *Falling Hare* and *Gremlins from the Kremlin* was retitled *Russian Rhapsody.* (Even so, that cartoon, with its memorable title song, and the Bugs Bunny short have kept the original concept of Gremlins as airborne mischief-makers in the public consciousness for the past sixty years.)

Walt never got a handle on his feature film, and after spending $50,000, he shut it down in late 1943. No two sources agree on the exact reason why.

On December 18, 1943, Disney wrote to Dahl in England, "Definitely, the Gremlins will not be made as a feature because of the feeling on the distributors' part that the public has become tired of so many war films. We have given considerable thought to the possibility of making the Gremlins into a short and I have personally endeavored to generate some interest among the various crews but haven't met with any degree of success."

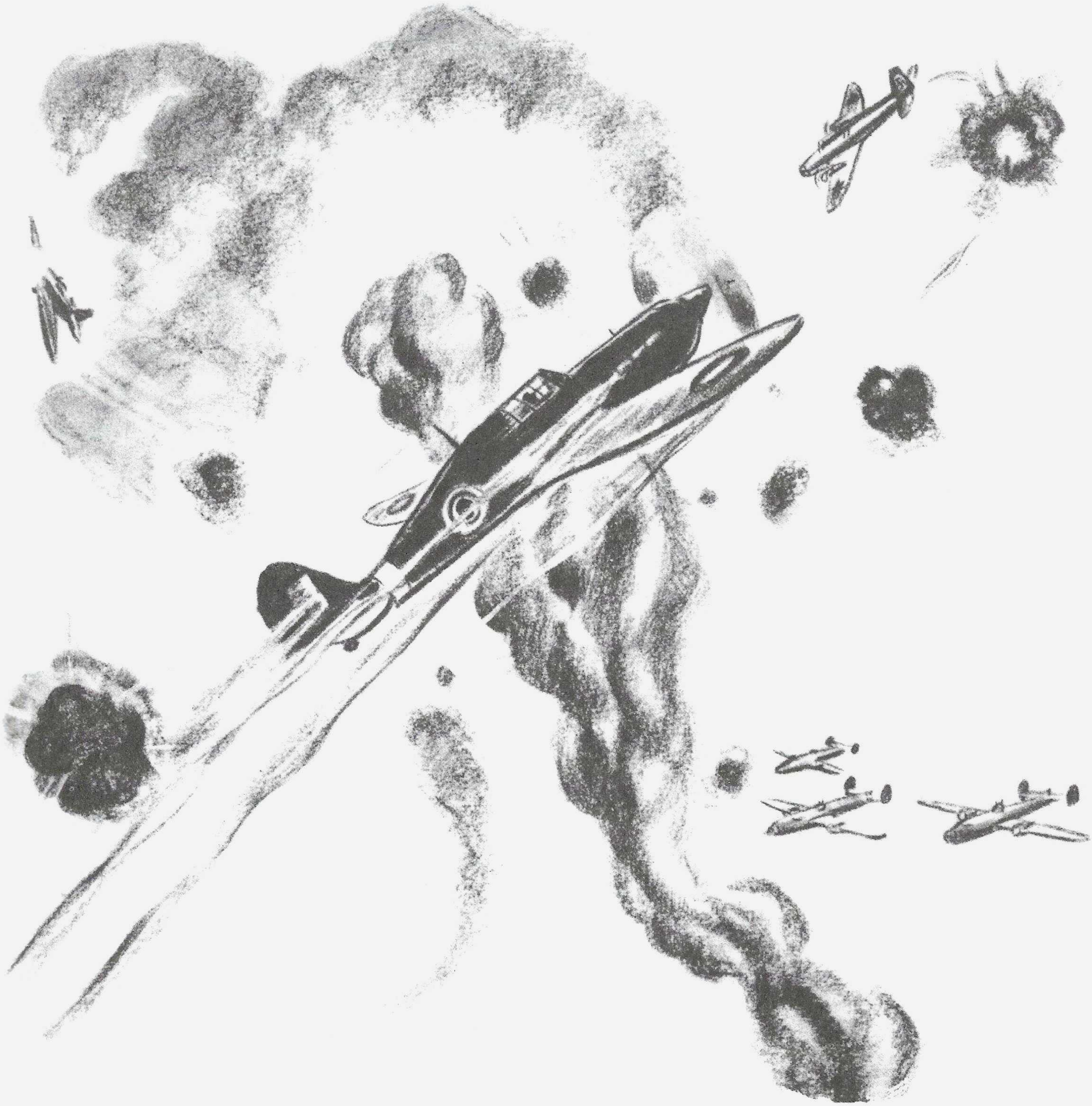
The Disney Gremlins did live on in the form of military insignias. From the outset of World War II, the studio was besieged with requests for logos from all branches of the armed forces. Walt assigned several artists to create these one-of-a-kind designs on a full-time basis. You'll find examples in Walton Rawls's excellent book *Disney Dons Dogtags,* where the Gremlins appear on at least thirty emblems designed for such far-flung divisions as the 17th Weather Squadron of San Francisco, the Royal Netherlands Military Flying School, and the Royal Canadian Air Force "Sky Sweepers."

In 1943 Fifinella was adopted as the official mascot of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP. She appeared on patches, letterheads, matchbook covers, and decals. A painting of the insignia appears in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. amidst a display of vintage military uniforms.

Even so, it's a shame this charming book has lain dormant for so long. I'm delighted that Dark Horse has chosen to bring it back to life after all these years.

I can't help but feel that both Walt Disney and Roald Dahl would be proud.

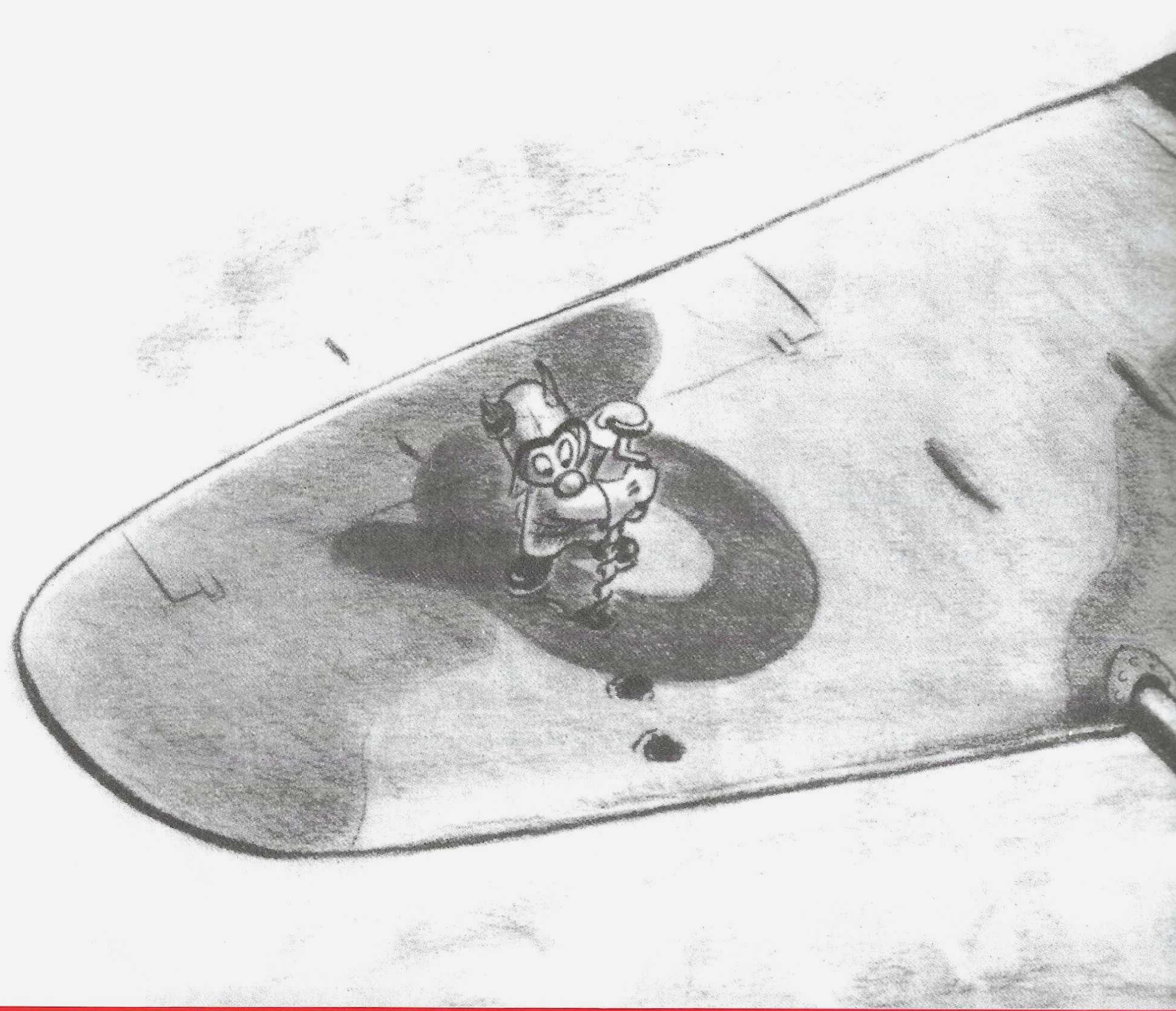
**LEONARD MALTIN** *is best known for his annual paperback reference* Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide, *and has appeared on television's* Entertainment Tonight *since 1982. His many other books include* Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons *and* The Disney Films. *He teaches at the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television, and hosts and coproduces the* Walt Disney Treasures *DVDs. He publishes a quarterly newsletter for old-movie buffs,* Leonard Maltin's Movie Crazy, *and presides over www.leonardmaltin.com.*

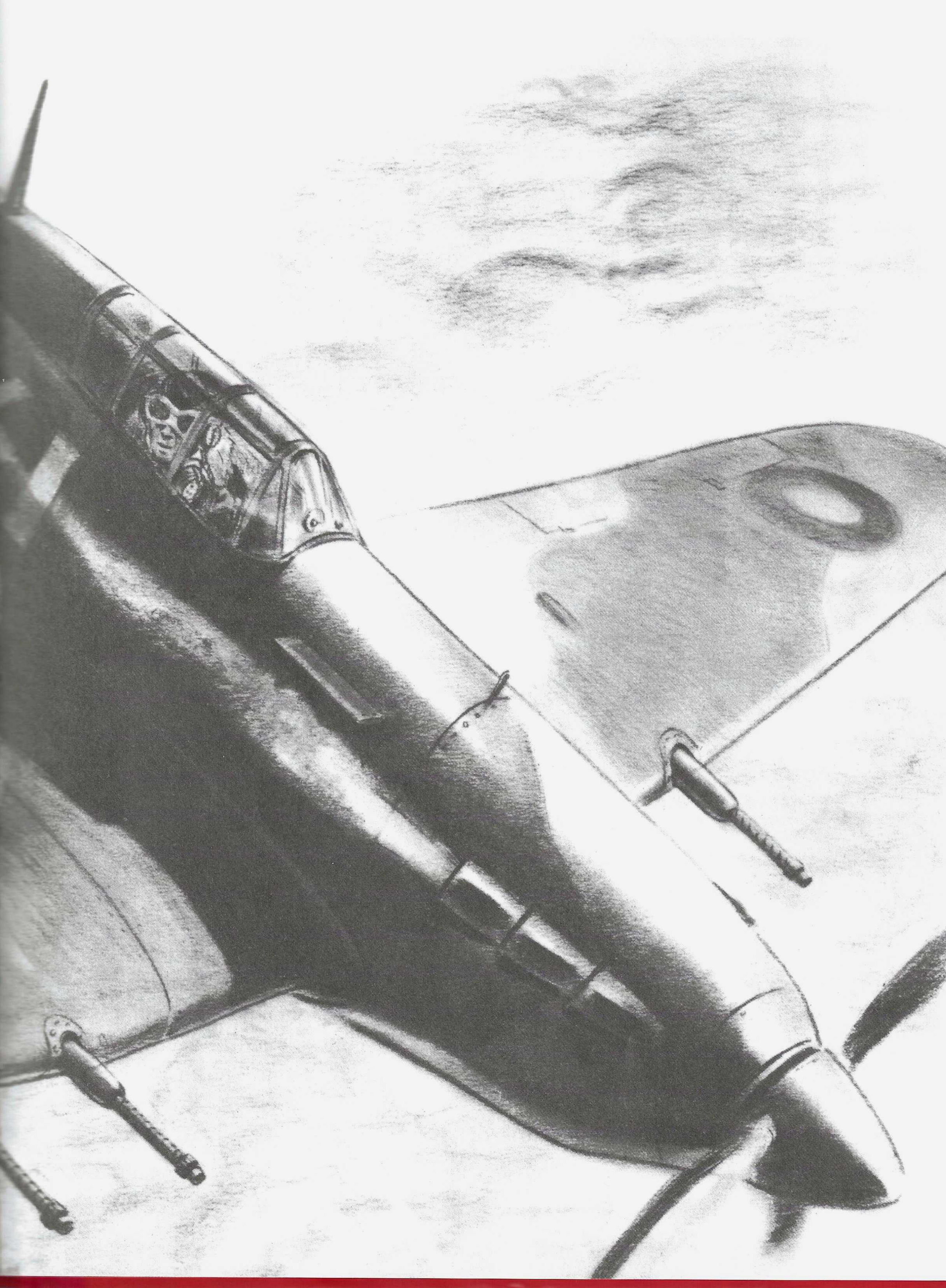


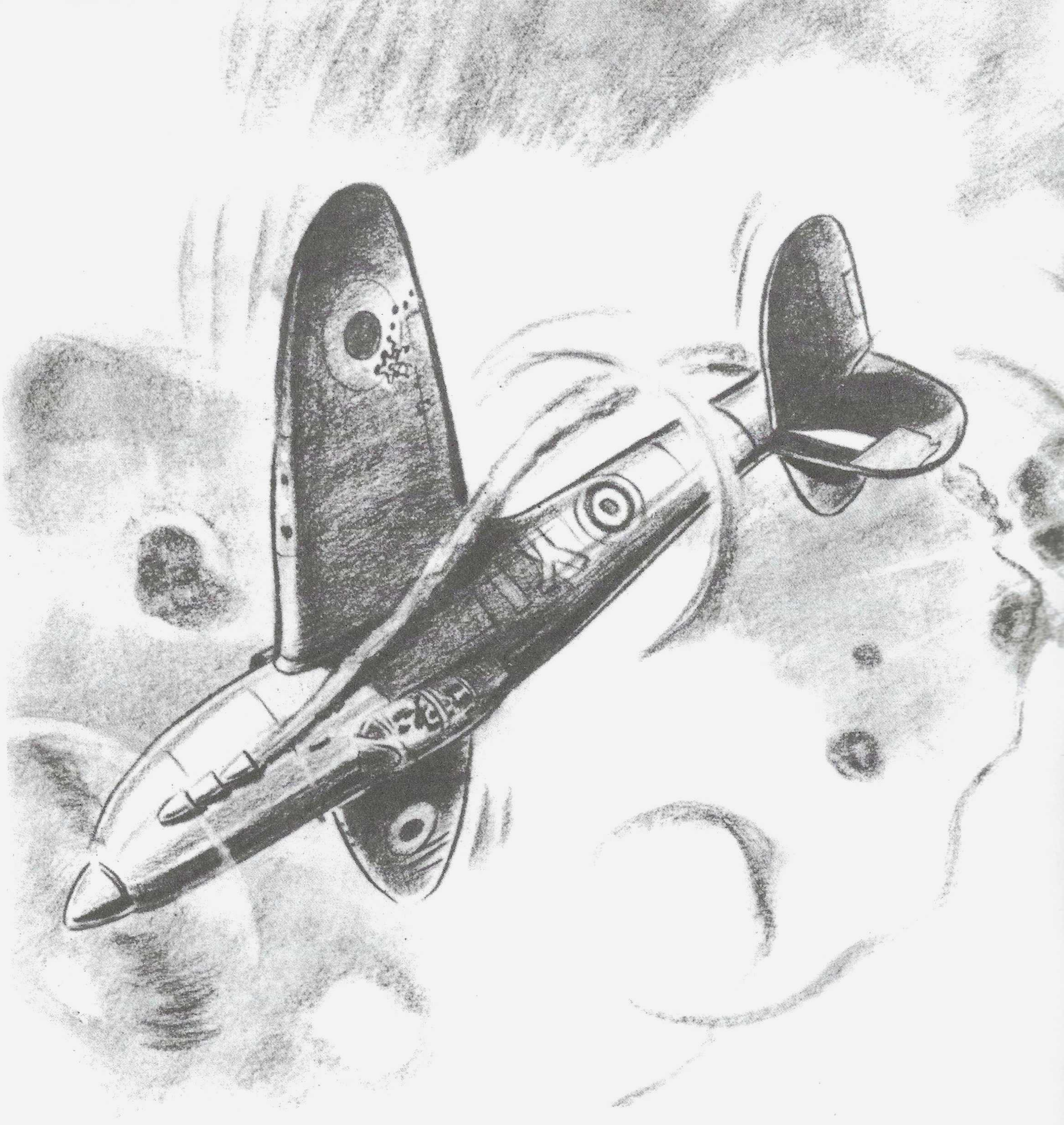
It was some time during the Battle of Britain, when Hurricanes and Spitfires were up from dawn to dark and the noise of battle was heard all day in the sky; when the English countryside from Thanet to Severn was dotted with the wreckage of planes. It was in the early autumn, when the chestnuts were ripening and the apples were beginning to drop off the trees—it was then that the first gremlins were seen by the Royal Air Force.

A pilot called Gus, patrolling in his Hurricane at 18,000 feet over Dover, was chasing a Junkers 88 and squirting at it with his guns in short, sharp bursts. He could see a lot of little blue puffs trailing out astern; the German's rear gunner was returning his fire. He happened to glance to starboard, and there, standing on his wing, he saw a little man, scarcely more than six inches high, with a large round face and a little pair of horns growing out of his head. On his legs were a pair of shiny black suction boots, which made it possible for him to remain standing on the wing at 300 miles an hour.

And do you know what he was doing? He had a large drill, almost as big as himself, grasped firmly in both hands, and he was busily boring holes in the Hurricane's wing.

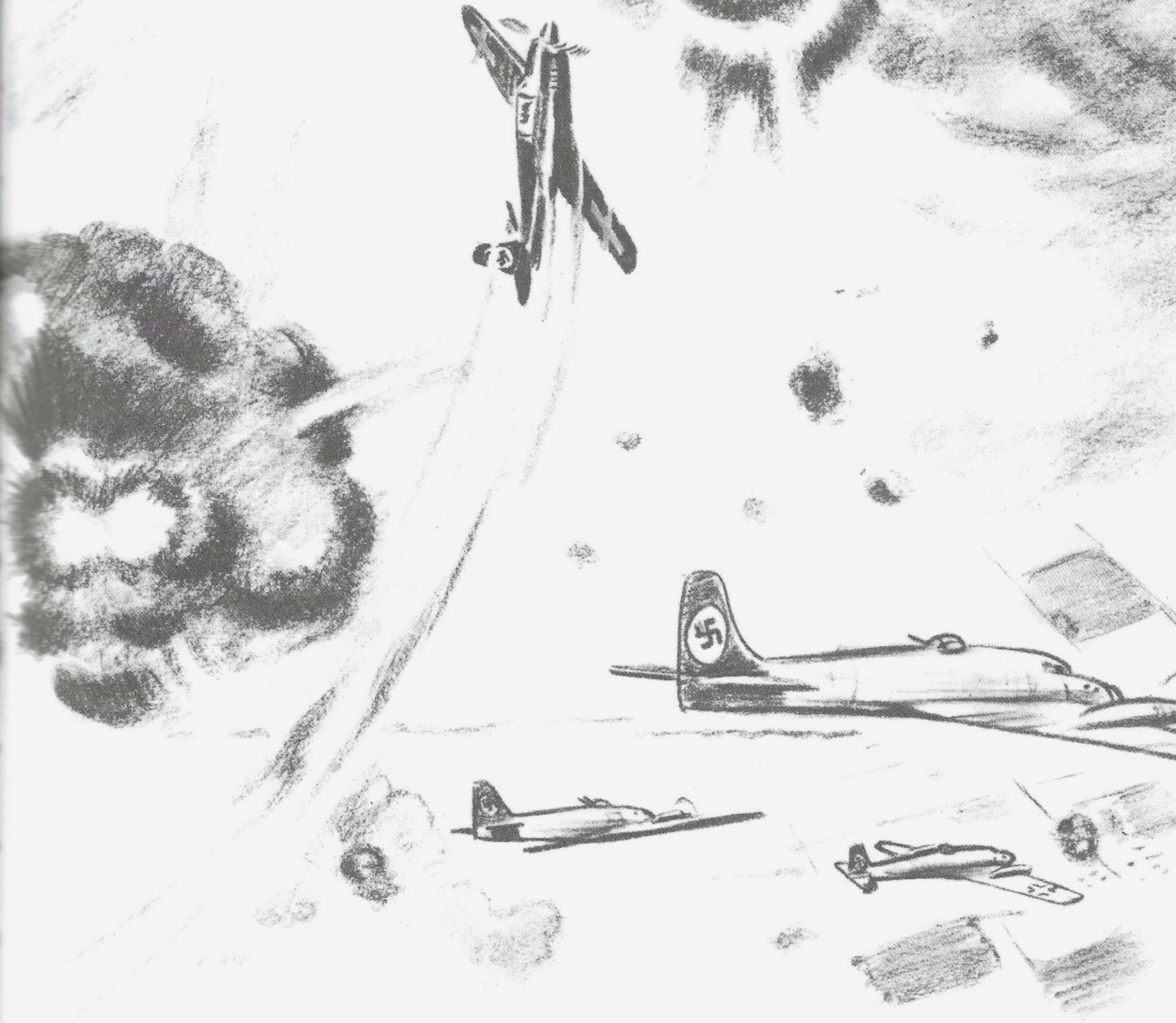






Gus did a few flick rolls, hoping to dislodge him, but the suction boots held and the little man took no notice. He just went on boring, with a look of the purest concentration on his face. When he had done about four holes, he slung his drill over his shoulder, waddled up the wings, clambered onto the engine cowling, and bored a neat hole right through and into the magneto.

The engine coughed; it sputtered; then it stopped.



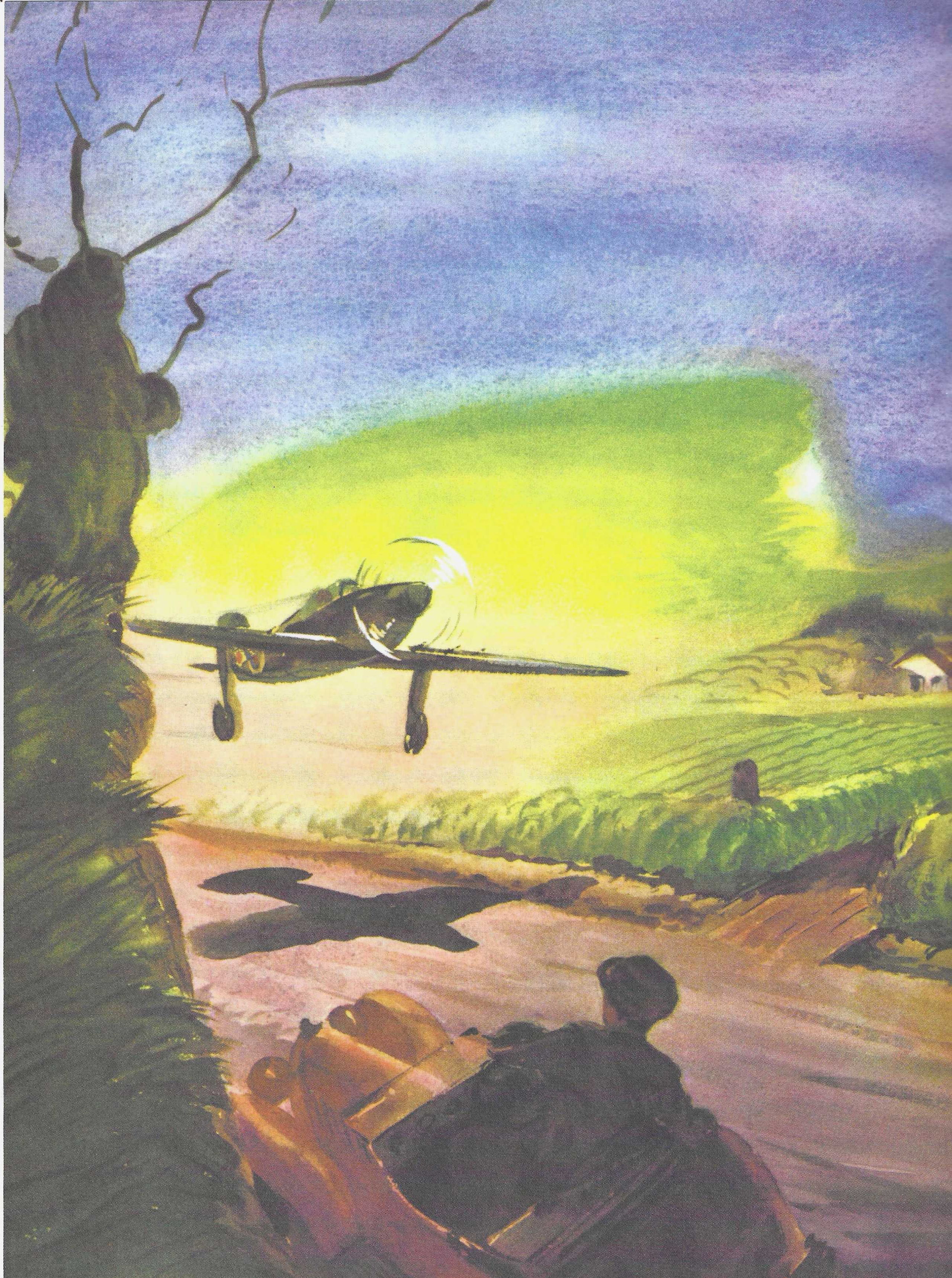
Gus kept his head and put her down nice and easy on a straight strip of the Dover-London road, got out, and asked a policeman to get on the phone to his squadron and tell them where he was.

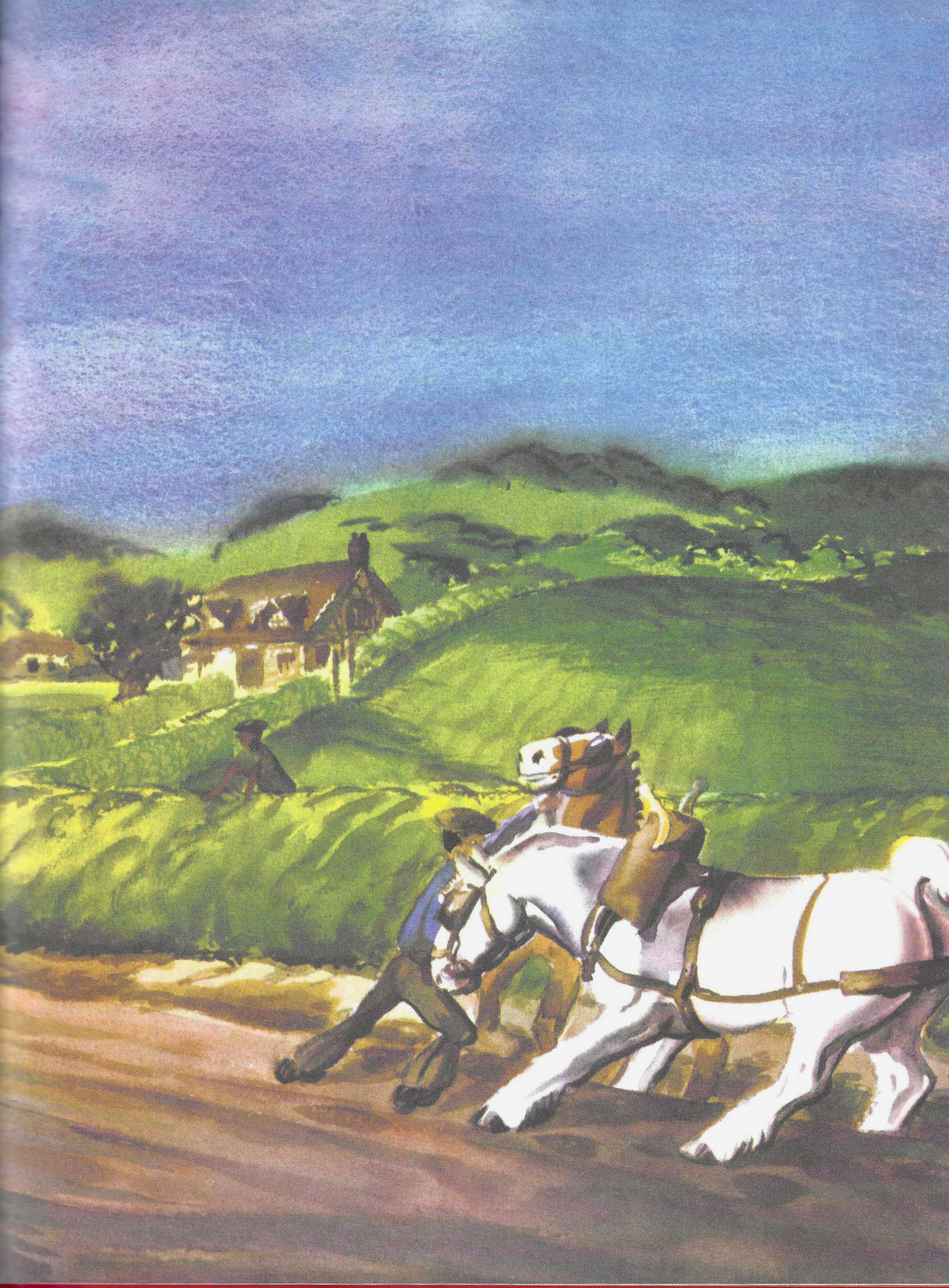
A little later his sergeant and fitter turned up in the squadron van and examined the machine.

"Four bullet holes in your starboard wing, sir," the sergeant reported, "and one's gone through your engine cowling and lodged in your magneto casing."

"Sergeant, those aren't bullet holes," replied Barry; "a gremlin did that."

And so, there on the Dover-London road, a new word was born.





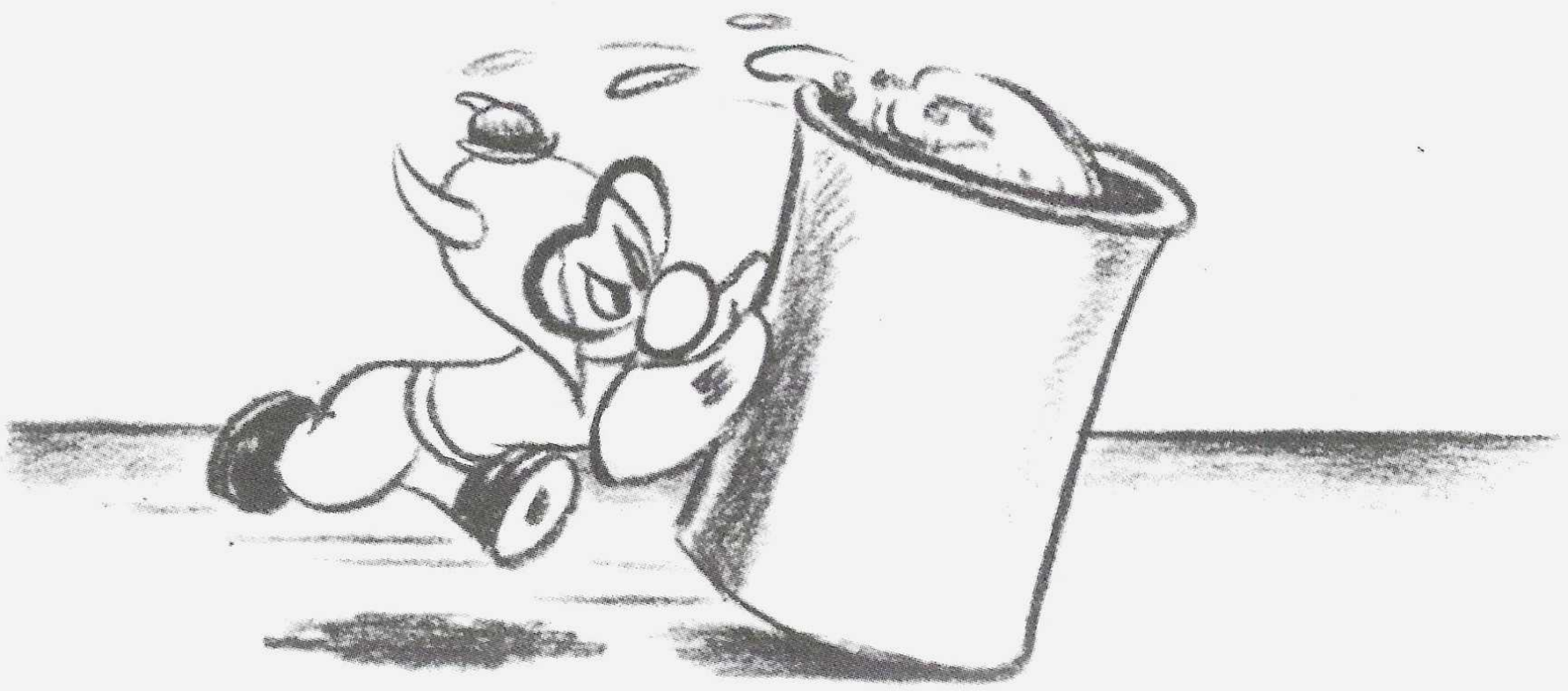
This word was to spread through the R.A.F. like a prairie fire. It would travel over the seas to the pilots in Malta, to the desert airdromes of Libya and Egypt, and to remote landing grounds in Palestine and Iraq. Someone mentioned it in India and someone else in Ceylon—and now they all had it—

IT WAS A VERY FAMOUS WORD.

After his forced landing, Gus made his way back to the squadron and started to tell his story to the pilots in the mess at drinking time. Leaning up against the mantelpiece with a mug of ale in his hand, he was holding forth to his two friends, Jamface and Stuffy.

Then Stuffy spoke. "Gremlins?" he drawled, looking at Gus sideways. "Gremlins? Never heard of them."

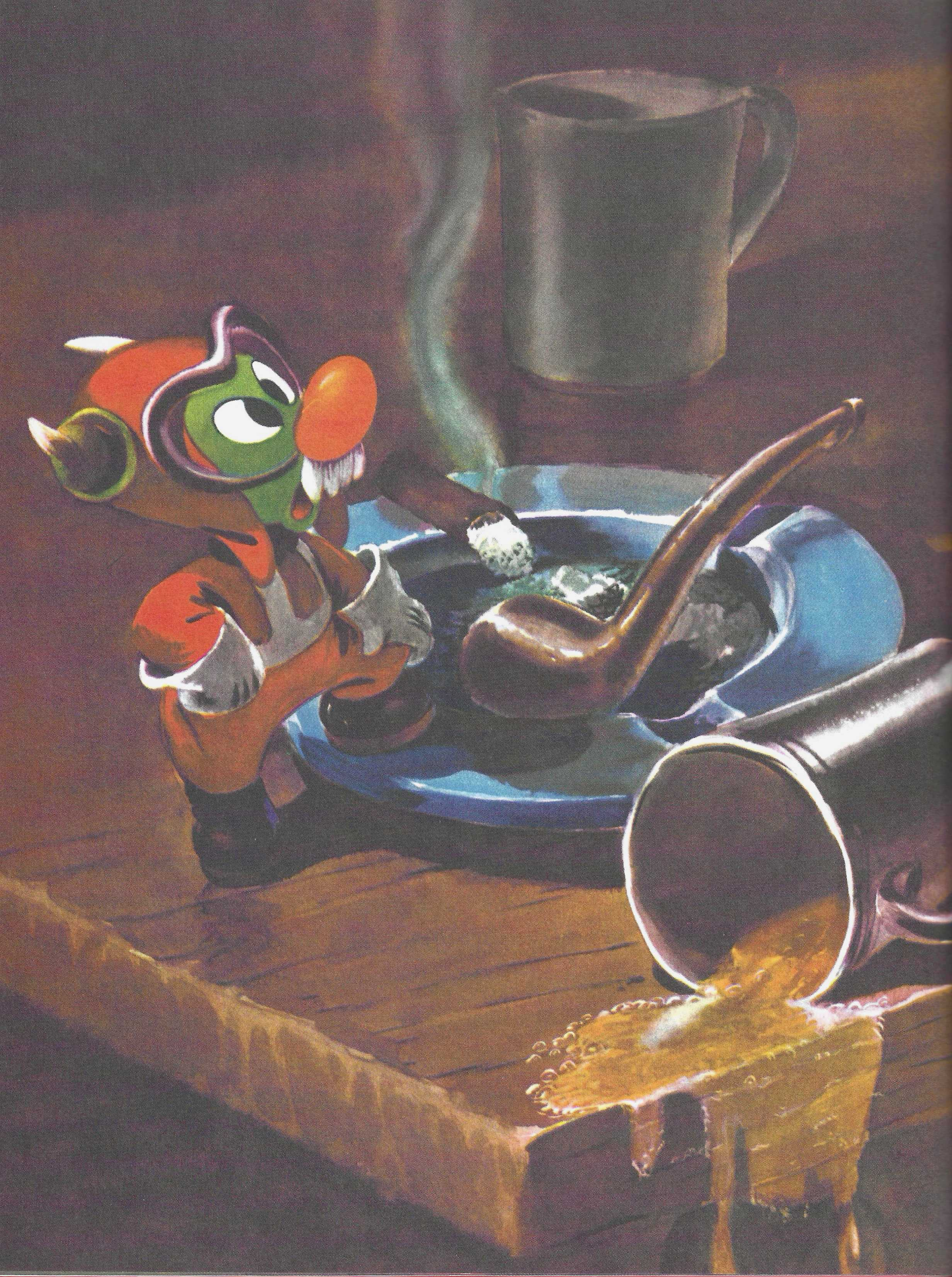
Just then there was a scuffle among the ash trays on the table and a little man ran over, leaned his shoulder hard against Stuffy's mug of beer, and began to push. Before Stuffy could reach it, the mug slid off the table onto the floor and smashed into tiny little pieces. The little man peered over the edge at the frothy pool which was spreading over the carpet, just to make sure that he had done his work properly; then he stepped back and put his hands on his hips.

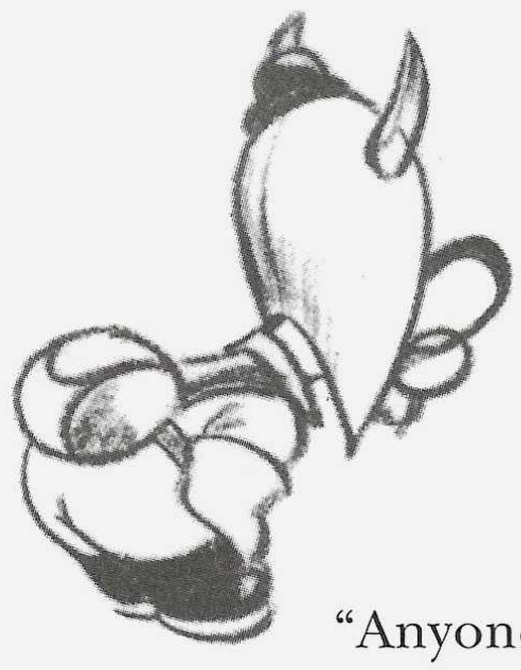


Stuffy's jaw dropped. He looked at the gremlin, then he looked at Gus, and then he looked at the gremlin again. The gremlin just stared at Stuffy, with a "so-you've-never-heard-of-me" look on his wrinkled, rather vinegary brown face. He had a strawberry nose which looked like the moon through a telescope, and his head, with its stubby horns, was as bald as could be. Obviously, he was a very old gremlin.

He was wearing a little red bridge jacket, with a pair of well-cut corduroy trousers to match, and on his head, tilted at as much of an angle as his horns would allow, was a green derby. And of course he had on his shiny black suction boots.

Then he spoke, and his voice was surprisingly deep and hoarse.





"Anyone else not heard of me?" he asked. He looked around the group of pilots, and with one accord they all leaped forward and seized their mugs of beer before they, too, should be pushed onto the floor.

No one spoke. Thereupon the gremlin turned around, winked at Gus, and slid down the leg of the table onto the floor. He stumped across to the door, mumbled something about a date with a fifinella, and disappeared.

Stuffy was the first to recover his voice.

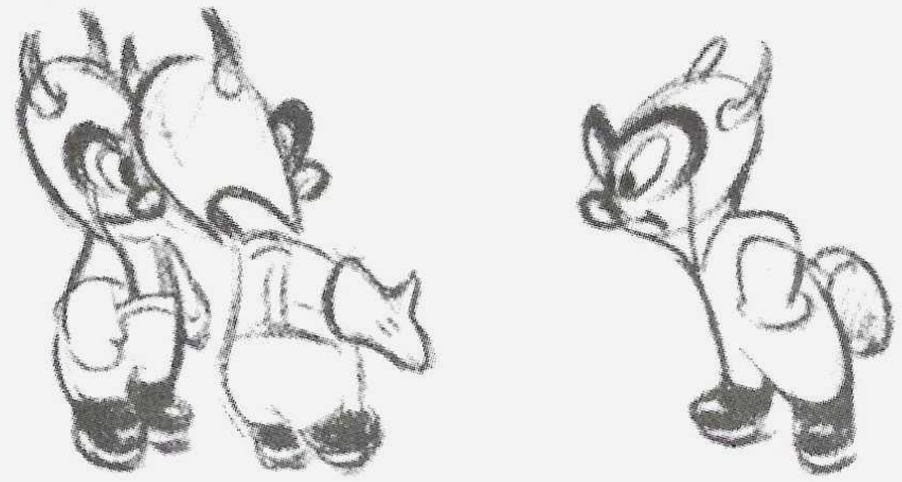
"That, I suppose," he said, "was your gremlin."

"Yes," said Gus; "it was Gremlin Gus." And he went on leaning against the mantelpiece and smoking his pipe.

"Friendly little type," said Jamface sarcastically.

Gremlin Gus lost no time in reporting his experience to the other gremlins who were waiting at the hangars.

"Well, the lid's off!" he announced. "I've just introduced myself to a few of the boys, and we can work in the open from now on."



It was three days after the first gremlin had appeared in the mess, and Gus and Stuffy were having breakfast after doing their dawn "stand-by."

Suddenly Jamface burst into the room in a high state of excitement. "I've seen a fifinella!" he announced.

"Don't be a nitwit," said Stuffy, and he was just about to say a lot more when there was a rustle of silk at the other end of the table, and something skipped nimbly across, dodging around the teapots, and stopped right in front of Stuffy.

It was a fifinella.

She stood there, hands on hips, enjoying their amazement. The pilots eyed her intently, from her small elegant, curly horns down to her handsome white buckskin boots. She returned their stares. Then she looked straight at Stuffy and said, in a high, shrill little voice that tinkled the glasses on the table, "Who's a nitwit?"

Stuffy just sat and stared, so the fifinella gave Jamface an enormous wink, caught a swaying curtain, swung herself onto the window sill, and was gone.

Jamface looked at Stuffy and asked in very satisfied tones, "Now who's a nitwit?"

Stuffy, who was a little angry, said, "You people seem to know so much. Perhaps you can tell me who these gremlins are and why they are here."

Gus pushed back his chair, lit a cigarette, and began his story.

"It was many many years ago," he began, "more almost than you could count, when the earth was just beginning to stir in its sleep. England then was a country of dark forests and greasy swamps, and all the land was shrouded in a thin white mist.

"All these forests and swamps were full of goblins and trolls and hob-goblins and pixies. They were everywhere, everywhere except in one beautiful green wood far up in the North. In this most beautiful green wood there lived a tribe of funny little people who were quite different from the rest. They had funny horns growing out of their funny heads and funny boots on their funny feet, and with these boots—and this was funniest of all—they could walk upside down under the branches of the trees.

"Oh, it was a happy and peaceful life that these little men led—until the humans came.

"But they had no warning of the invasion, for one morning their world was suddenly filled with a tremendous rumbling that shook their little houses and even the big trees. The rumbling came from a lot of great trucks that drove up to the edge of the wood. From the trucks jumped hundreds of humans, who marched in and, to the horror of the little people, started cutting down the trees. There was a great commotion amongst the tribe as they prepared to leave their homes. The younger ones and their wives hurriedly packed up all their belongings, while the older ones stormed about, shaking their fists at the giants who were ruining their homes. But all the workmen heard was a rustling in the carpet of leaves on the forest floor.

"There was nothing for the little men to do but to move very quickly out onto a hill nearby, where they just sat watching the humans who were destroying their homes. They watched them chopping and sawing until the whole wood had been taken away, including the roots of the trees, which they dug up with picks and shovels. Then they brought huge rollers which rolled the ground hard and smooth, so that anyone seeing the place for the first time would never even have believed that it had once been a most beautiful green wood. And as the days went by, the little people saw a huge factory rise on the spot where the wood had been.

"When at last the factory was finished and smoke came rolling from the chimneys, they thought it was time to act.

"They sent out scouts who crept down to the factory and peered into the windows. At evening they brought back their report: the factory was making airplanes. So that night the leader called a meeting, and after much discussion, a solemn agreement was reached.

"'We will follow those big tin birds wherever they go,' vowed the leader, and he spoke for them all, 'to get revenge for the loss of our homes. We will make mischief for them, and we will harry and tease the men who fly them, until we obtain some satisfaction for all the harm that has been done to us.'

"From that moment on, although for a time not a human suspected it, every plane that left the factory carried on board little stowaways.

"I trust," concluded Gus, "that makes things clear to you two clots. Now pass me the bread, Stuffy, and shut up!"

As the days went by it became more and more obvious that the gremlins had come to stay.

When Gus made a forced landing in a plowed field at night after losing his way, the C.O. hauled him into his office and began to let him have it. Gus stood stiffly at attention.

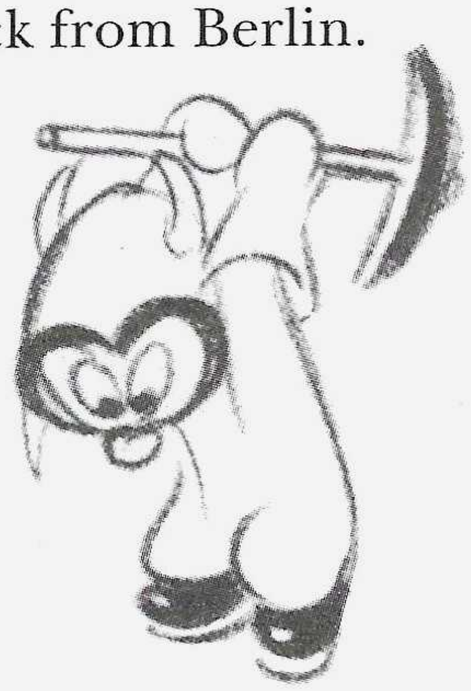
"Well, you see, sir," he said, "I was milling around in the dark over the airdrome when a gremlin popped his head through the window and said, 'Good evening. Do you know where you are?'

"I said of course I knew where I was and go away at once. Then he edged in a little further, sat on the side of the cockpit, and said, 'I suppose you're absolutely sure you know where you are?'

"I said, 'Will you go away, because I'm trying to concentrate.' Whereupon he climbed right into the cockpit and sat on the compass just in front of me, dangling his legs in the air. He was a night-flying gremlin and had a luminous face, which was a trifle disconcerting at the time.

"Then he said, 'Confidentially, I really don't think you've got the slightest idea where you are,' and I suddenly looked around and realized that I hadn't."

Then there was Jamface's story of how he got a leak in his gas tank on the way back from Berlin.



"The nautic-minded gremlins got me," he said.

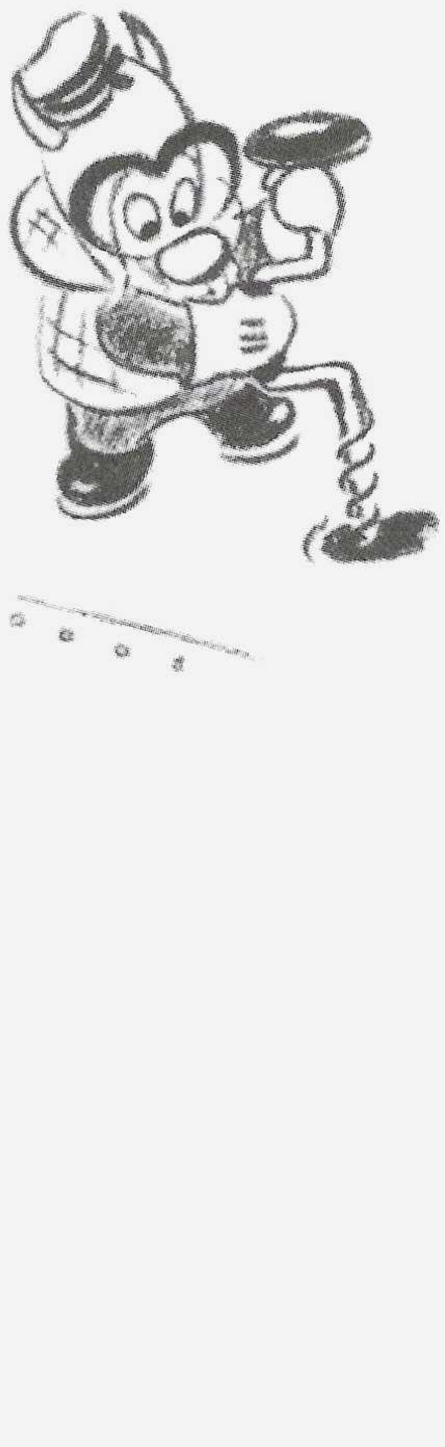
"What do you mean, nautic-minded gremlins?" asked Barry.

"Well," said Jamface, "they apparently came from the Coastal Command Station where they'd been doing a lot of flying over the Navy; they'd become very nautic-conscious, and they all wore sailor suits with little yellow Mae West jackets over them.

"One of them got into my plane, but we didn't find him until we were halfway back from Berlin. Then Gremlin Jamface came along, tapped me on the shoulder, and reported the presence of a nautic-minded gremlin on board.

"'What's he doing?' I asked, and Gremlin Jamface replied, 'He's climbed down onto your gas tank, bored a hole in the top, and gone in.'

"I said, 'Why did he do that?' and Gremlin Jamface looked at me as



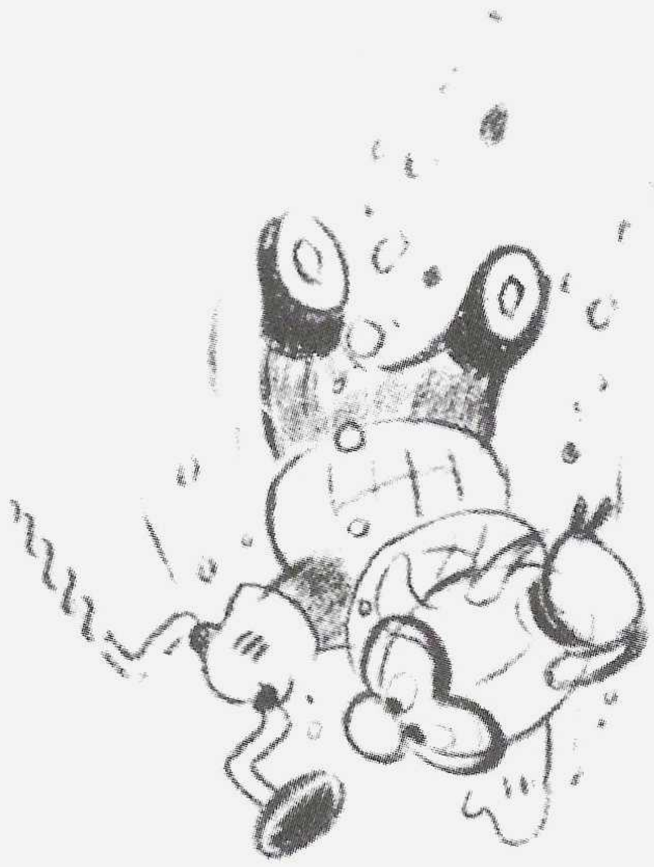
though I were a complete nitwit and answered patiently, 'To look for his boat, of course. As soon as the nautic-minded gremlin saw that there weren't any boats inside, he bored another hole in the bottom of the tank to get out again, and if I hadn't blocked it up myself you wouldn't have had any gas left at all by now, and your engine would have stopped long ago, and we'd have been forced down and all been made prisoners of war.'

"You see," said Jamface happily, "I've already started to get him working on the right lines. Gremlin Jamface is almost a very good gremlin."

"How do you do it?" asked Gus.

"Feed them used postage stamps," said Jamface.

"Feed them what?"



"I said used postage stamps. It's the only thing they eat. Transatlantic-special-delivery-airmail stamps are their greatest delicacy."

"I don't believe it," said Gus, and went off to look for some used postage stamps which he could offer to Gremlin Gus the next time he saw him.

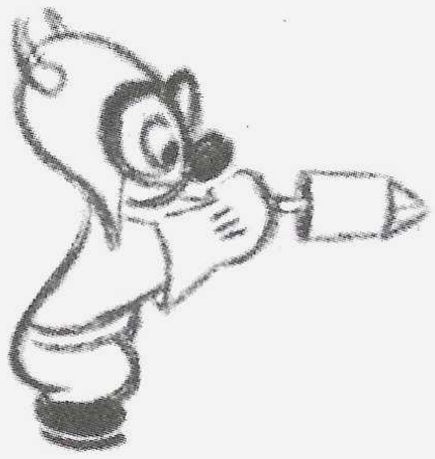
But Gremlin Gus didn't seem to respond to the postage-stamp treatment, and Gus himself became more and more worried. It came to a head one morning not long afterward when Gus was dicing with a bunch of Messerschmitt 109s and Heinkel 111s over the Channel.

He squirted one of the Heinkels, which dived away leaving a long plume of smoke in its wake. He was just about to have a go at another when he glanced in his mirror and saw a Messerschmitt on his tail, pouring incendiary bullets and cannon shell at him. He saw more than that. He saw smoke pouring out of his starboard wing just where his gas tank was, and through the smoke he saw Gremlin Gus kneeling down and playing the white-hot flame of an enormous blow torch through a hole in the smoldering wing onto the tank itself.

Just as the whole wing went up in flames, Gremlin Gus jumped aside, wriggled into the cockpit, and sat on Gus's knee. He was laughing so much that for a time he couldn't speak.

"You'd better jump before you bump," he said at last. "You'd better jump before you bump!"

Gus had no choice. He opened the hood, undid his straps, turned his machine over, and fell out, and Gremlin Gus went with him, clinging jauntily to the harness of his parachute. Together they tumbled over and over in a hundred mad somersaults until Gus pulled the ripcord and the parachute billowed out and pulled them up with a jerk.



As they floated down, Gus looked at the little man, who was sitting happily on the buckle of his parachute, busily polishing his blowtorch.

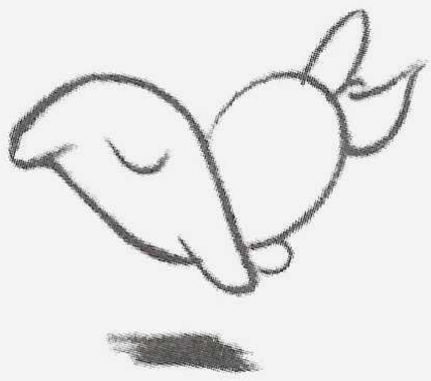
"You little devil!" he said, picking the gremlin up with two fingers and holding him out at arm's length. "I've a good mind to drop you. This is the second time you've ruined my airplane and nearly killed me. Why do you gremlins behave like this?"

But Gremlin Gus just scowled. "Has anyone," asked Gus, "ever done anything to hurt you? I know I haven't." A large, salty tear welled out of Gremlin Gus's eye and trickled down his cheek.

"You men cut down the gremlin wood," he sniffled, "and gave the land to your giant tin birds."

"Oh—so that's the trouble! Look here—these tin birds are planes, and they're helping us fight to save our homes—and your home, too. If you help us win this fight, we'll give you gremlins the deepest wood in England for your very own. Let's join forces and fight together. Isn't that fair enough?"

But before Gremlin Gus could answer they landed right in the English Channel, and after that it took all his strength to cling onto Gus's hair, while they bobbed up and down in the chilly water for three solid hours. All that time Gus was arguing and reasoning, and at last he won.



Gremlin Gus sat still for a few moments. Then, very slowly, taking a great risk of tumbling off and being drowned, he crawled forward. Leaning over Gus's forehead, he wiped the salt water out of his master's eyes with a tiny little handkerchief.

Four hours later they were picked up by an R.A.F. rescue launch and landed at a little village on the Sussex Coast.

One evening a few days later, when the pilots were once more drinking ale in the mess, and the talk was all of gremlins and fifinellas, Jamface burst into the room in a state of high excitement.

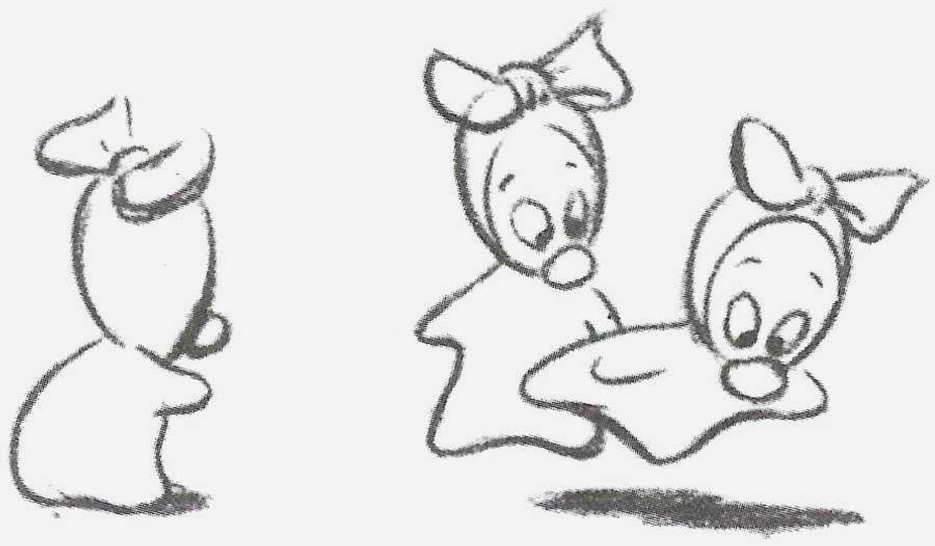
"I've just found a nest of widgets," he said, and looked around in triumph.

"Widgets?" said Stuffy. "Widgets? Never heard of them!"

But Jamface went on. "As I said, I've just found a nest of widgets located in the rear turret of my plane. There were twelve of them—very young ones."

"What are widgets?" asked Gus.

"It's very simple," said Jamface. "Widgets are the young of gremlins and fifinellas. No one knows until they grow up whether they are going to turn into males or females, but it's usually males; in each nest of twelve widgets only one will eventually turn into a fifinella."



But Stuffy wouldn't believe it.

"All this talk of widgets is complete and utter nonsense. And what's more, Jamface—"

But he was never allowed to finish the sentence. The whole room was suddenly filled with little squeaks and yells, as a whole army of little creatures hurled themselves at Stuffy in one solid mass.

They climbed onto his shoulders and pulled his hair; they tweaked his nose and they poked and tickled and scratched him until he dropped his cigarette. Two of them got hold of the cigarette, hoisted it onto their shoulders and, taking a little run along the top of his shoe, drove the hot end like a battering ram into his ankle.

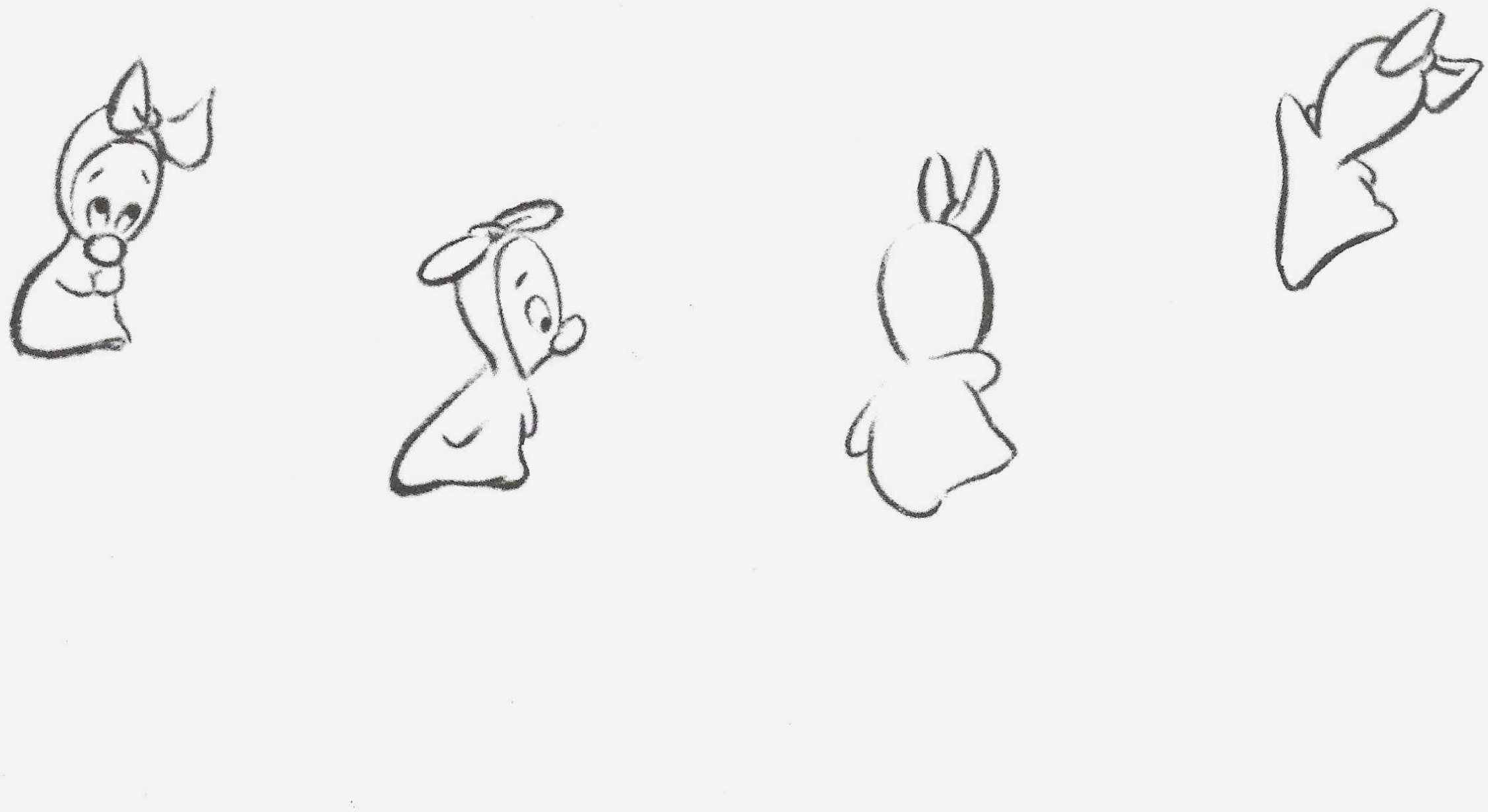
Stuffy leaped up with a yell, and his mug of beer flew across the room and shattered on the floor.

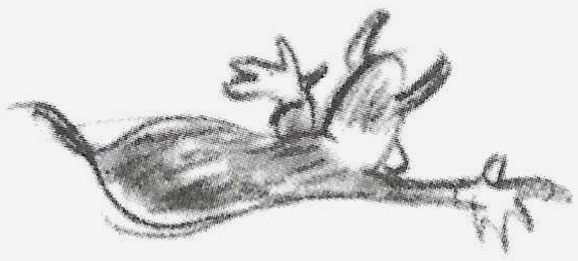
The widgets, well satisfied with their work, peered up at Stuffy. But, crane as they might, they could not see above his ankles, for they were so small that you had to look three times before you were quite sure they were there.

Then the widget leader spoke, and his voice was like the squeaking of a mouse.

"What," he said, "is complete and utter nonsense?"

But Stuffy did not answer. So the widgets turned around and marched out of the room in line astern.





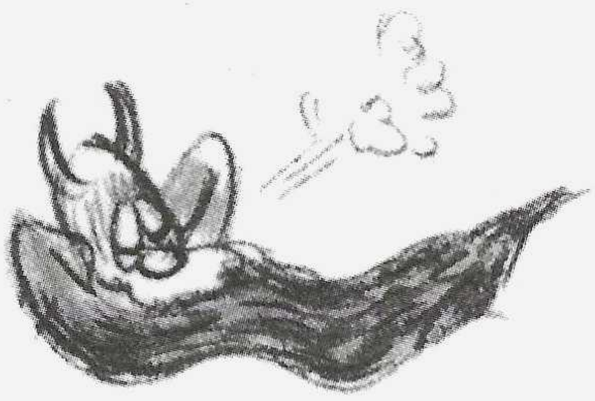
Then Stuffy told of how, when patrolling at thirty-five thousand feet, he had flown through one of those enormous cumulus clouds and disturbed a swarm of spandules. There were shouts of derision when he had spoken, and Jamface said, "Stuffy, you're imagining things!" But Stuffy was serious.

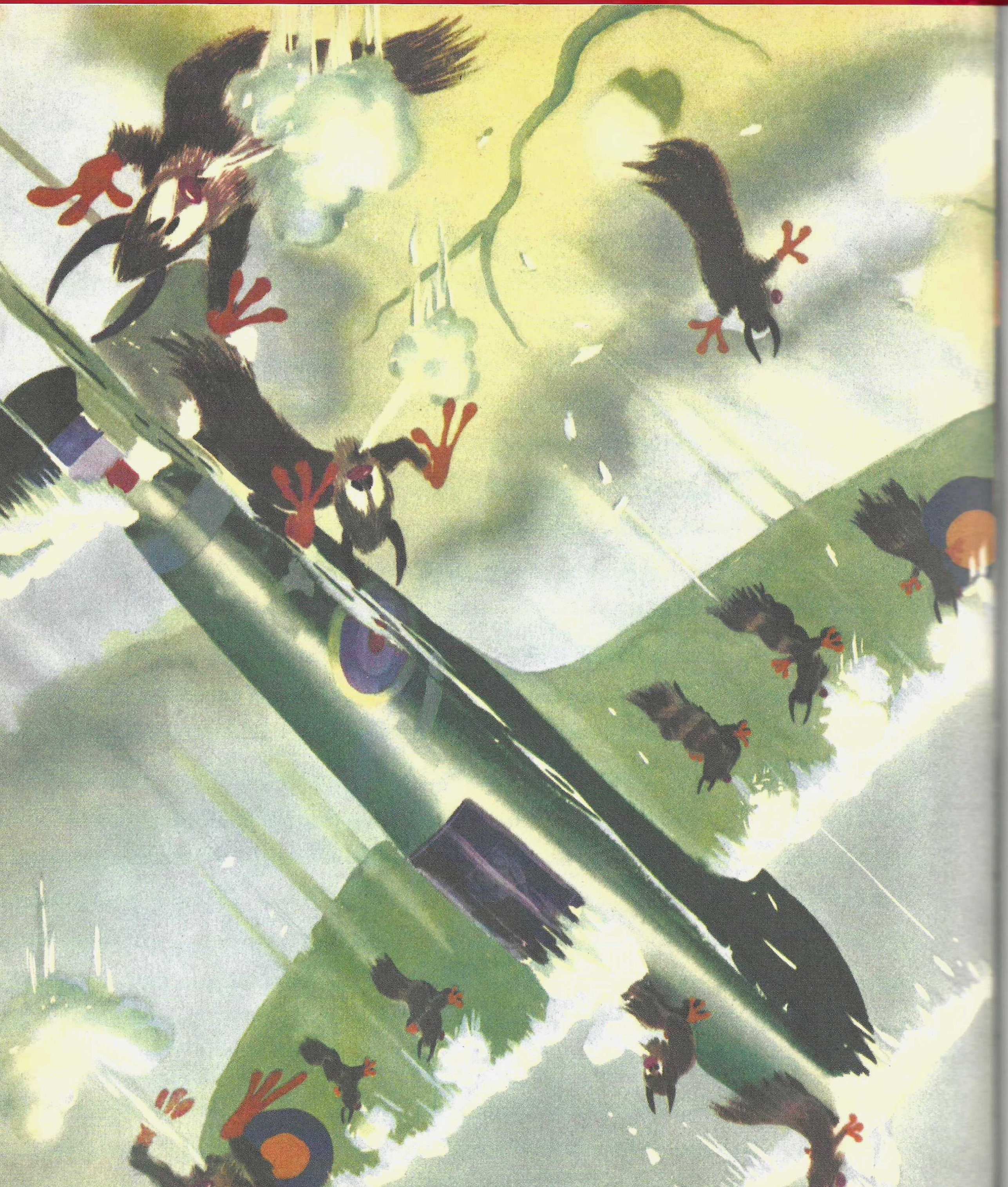
"These spandules," he said, "are terrifying creatures. They're a breed of high-altitude gremlins, to be found only above thirty thousand feet. They live in the rolling valleys of huge, white cumulus clouds, and all day they eat hailstones. They're at least three times as big as ordinary gremlins, and their bodies are specially designed for high-altitude work. They're covered with long, black hair to protect them against the terrific cold, and their faces look rather like oxygen masks—which probably helps them to breathe the thin air. Their bodies are flat and thin, and therefore not affected by the pressure.

"The ones I saw," continued Stuffy, "had no legs—just short arms with suction gloves on their hands. With these they attached themselves to my wings, looking like nothing so much as a lot of washing flapping on the line. They hung there and blew great puffs of cold air onto the leading edges, and layers of ice began to form all over my plane. While they worked they crunched hailstones, and the noise of their eating sounded like thunder.

"Naturally, I went into a spin and didn't come out for twenty thousand feet, by which time the ice had melted away.

"The funny part about it was," concluded Stuffy, "that one old spandule got his hand caught in my starboard aileron and got carried down with me. As soon as we got below thirty thousand he just melted away, and all that remained on the wing was a pair of suction gloves and a damp patch with a few black hairs sticking to it."





It was ten days later. Gus was at readiness.

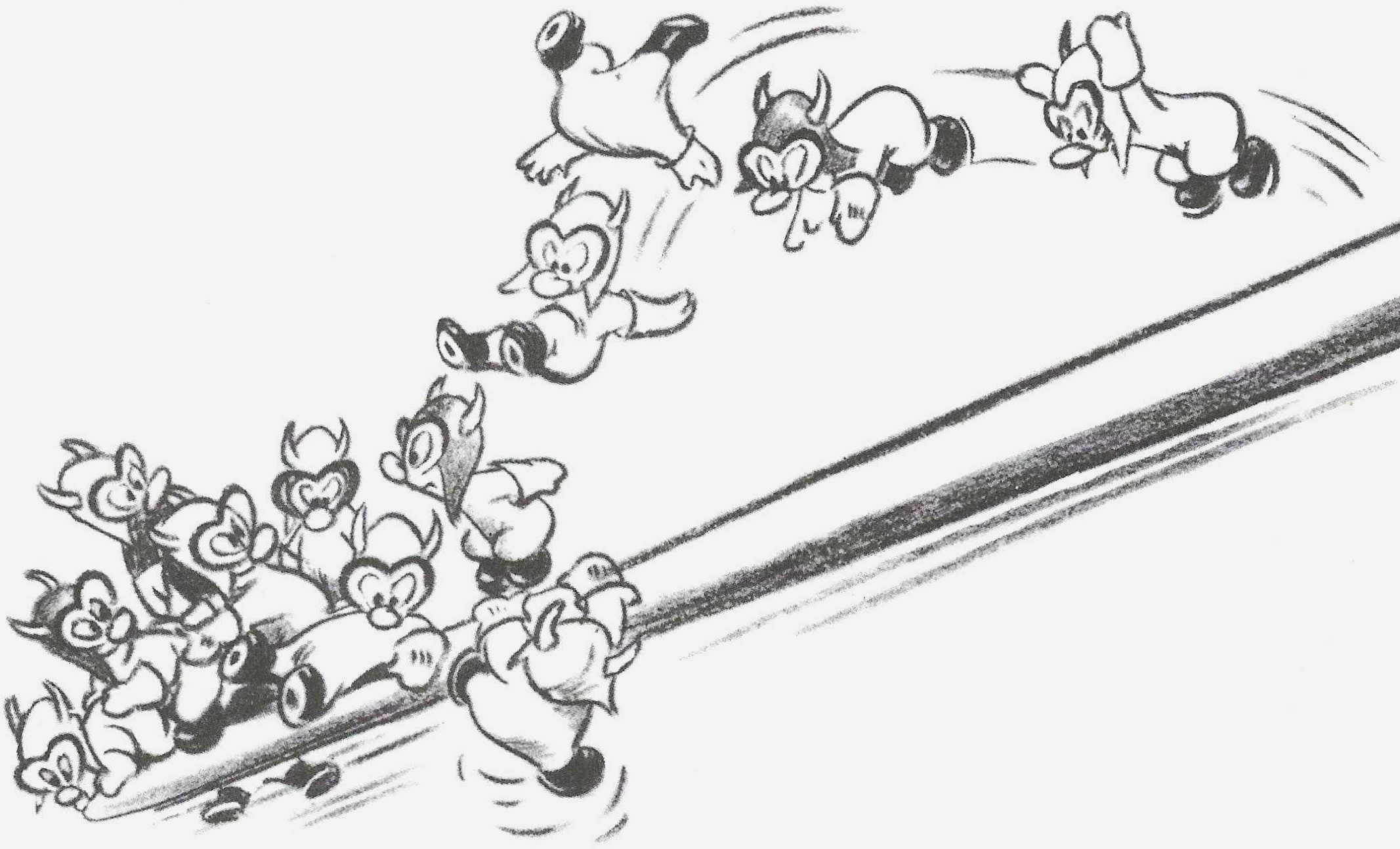
He had a temperature of about 102°, and a head that felt like a kitchen range. Obviously he had the flu, but he was at war with the medicos and refused to report it. He was standing by his aircraft idly watching another machine circling the field to land.

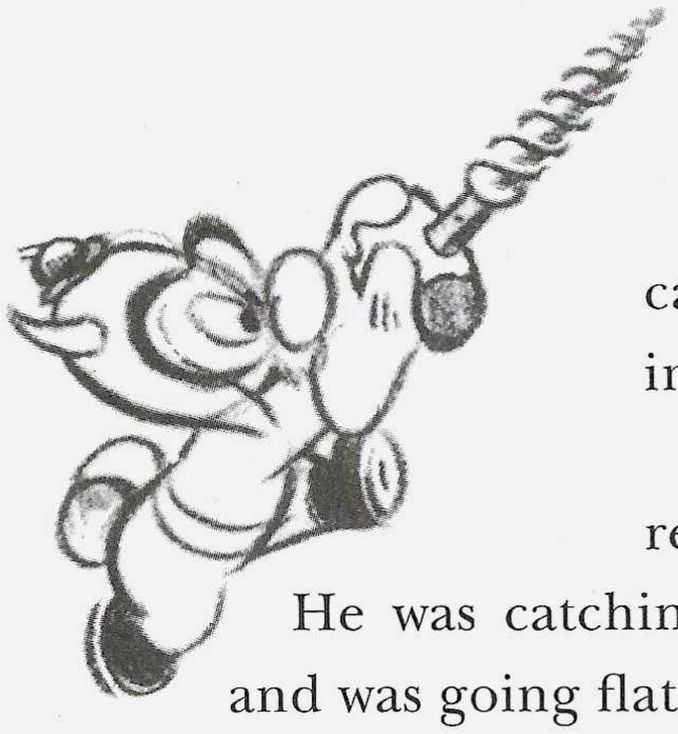
Just then a head poked out of the window of the nearest hut and a voice shouted: "Red two scramble; scramble, Red two, scramble. Get your orders in the air."

Gus was in the cockpit of his Hurricane like a flash—parachute buckled, harness fastened, gas on, switches on—and away.

Gremlin Gus, who had by now received a little training and was well on the way to becoming a good gremlin, clambered up onto his master's shoulder and whispered: "You can't fly with flu, you can't fly with flu; better not try, better not try."

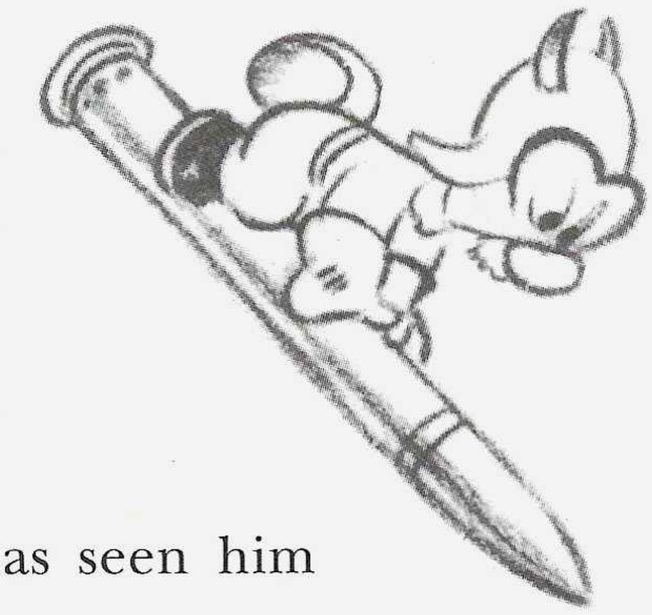
But it was too late, and Gus had made up his mind anyway. Just how he got off the ground he never knew. The starboard wing dropped so suddenly and violently that it nearly went into the ground. Gus saw just what had happened. A whole group of gremlins, standing by the cockpit, had taken a running jump onto the wing tip just as the plane took off.





Gus switched over his radio. "Red two calling control. Tally ho, tally ho, going into attack. Over."

"Hello, Red two, control calling. Message received. Good luck. Over."



He was catching up, but not fast enough. The Hun has seen him and was going flat out.

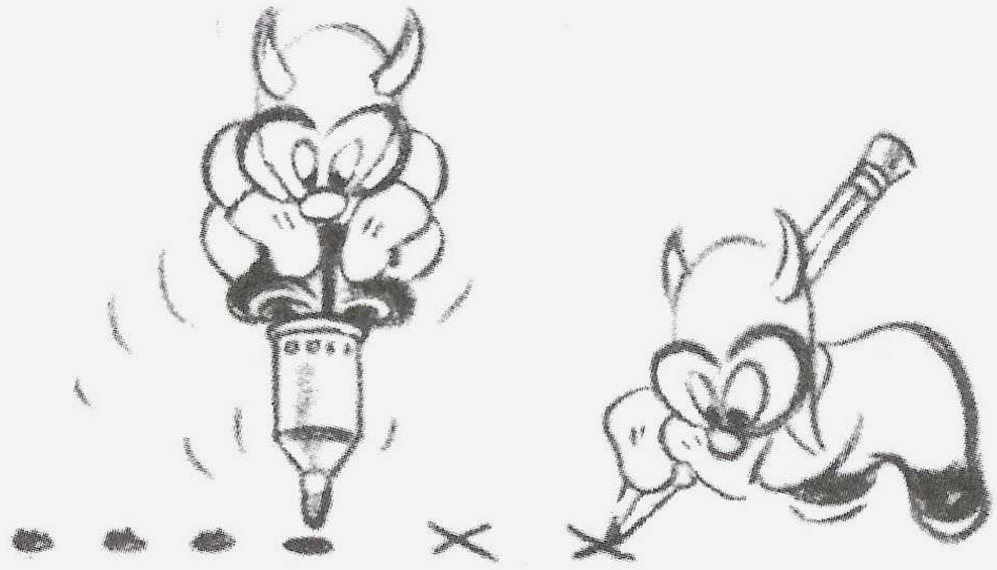
"Better pull the plug," Gus thought; "that always helps." Yes, that did help for a moment.

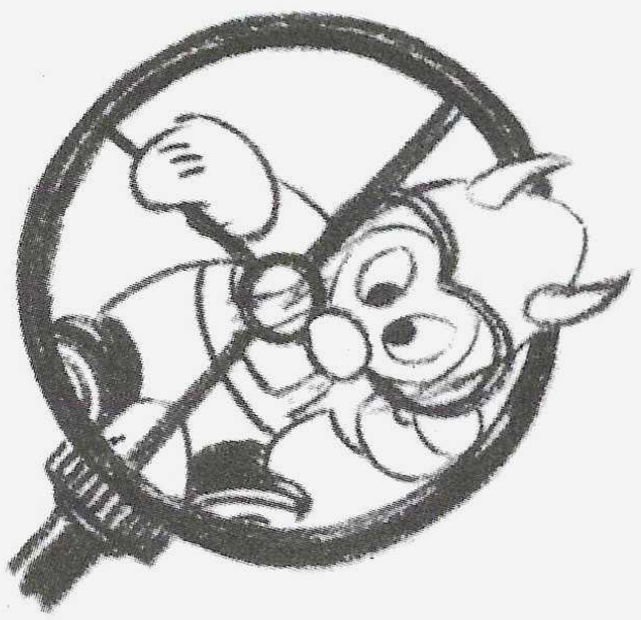
But Gus never had a chance. The German pilot, using one of the oldest tricks in the world, waited for him to come up close. Then, like lightning, he throttled back and at the same time applied just a little bit of flap. The Heinkel seemed to stop dead in the air, and the Hurricane shot past before Gus could do anything about it.

The German rear-gunner was waiting for him. He raked the Hurricane from stem to stern as it passed, and Gus's right leg fell limply off the rudder bar. He had stopped two bullets, one through the kneecap and one in the ankle.

It hurt like blazes and was bleeding fast. The Hurricane was almost out of control because gremlins were out on the wings, boring holes, jerking at control cables, and hammering on the cockpit cover. There was a gang of at least twelve of them working on the port gas tank with drills!

Everything was going wrong. Gus's head was spinning and everything started to go hazy.





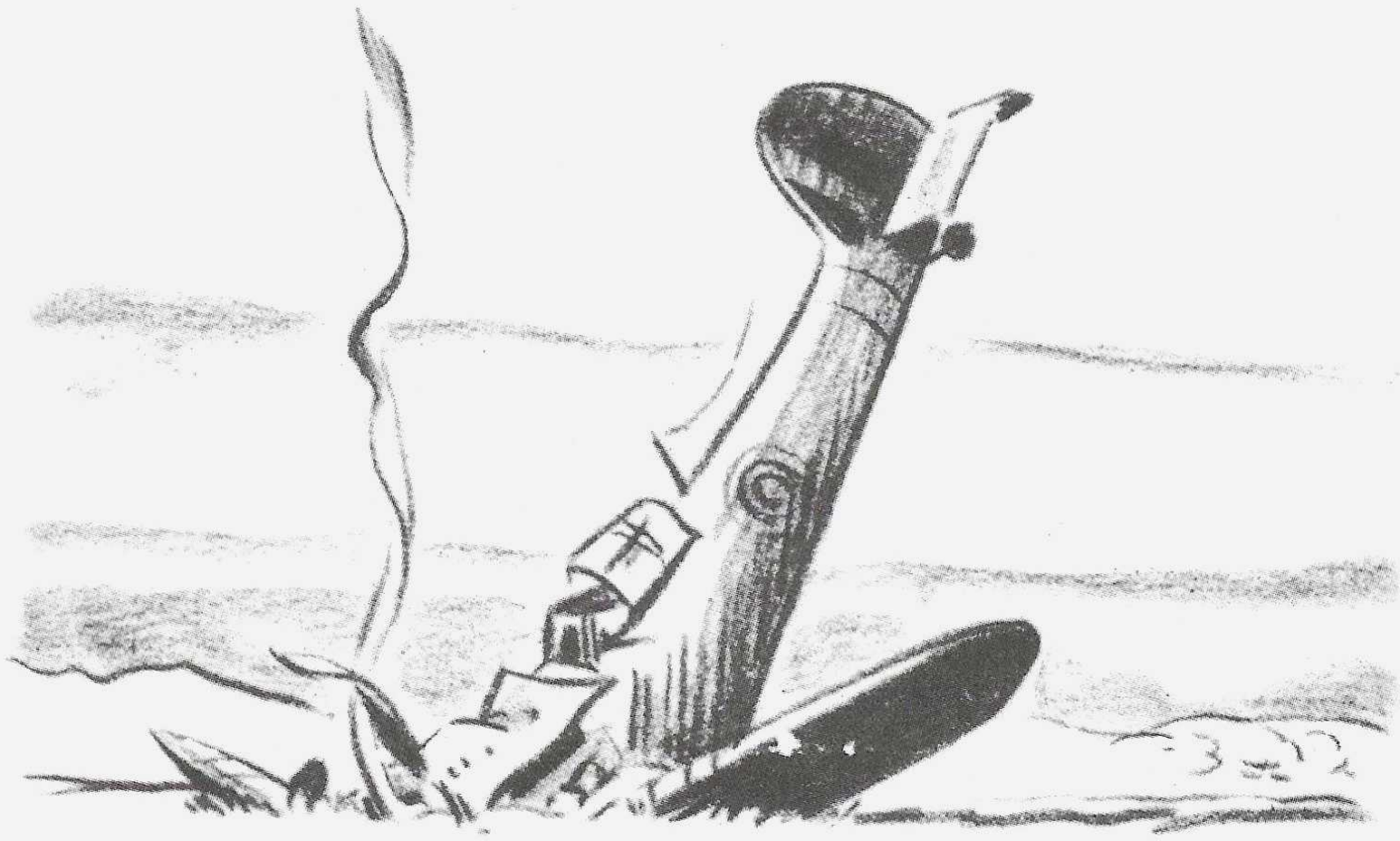
How he found the landing field he never knew. Nor did he know how the engine kept going, or how he himself managed to remain sufficiently conscious to retain control. What he did know was why he landed in the plowed field about a hundred yards short of his goal and turned over on his back.

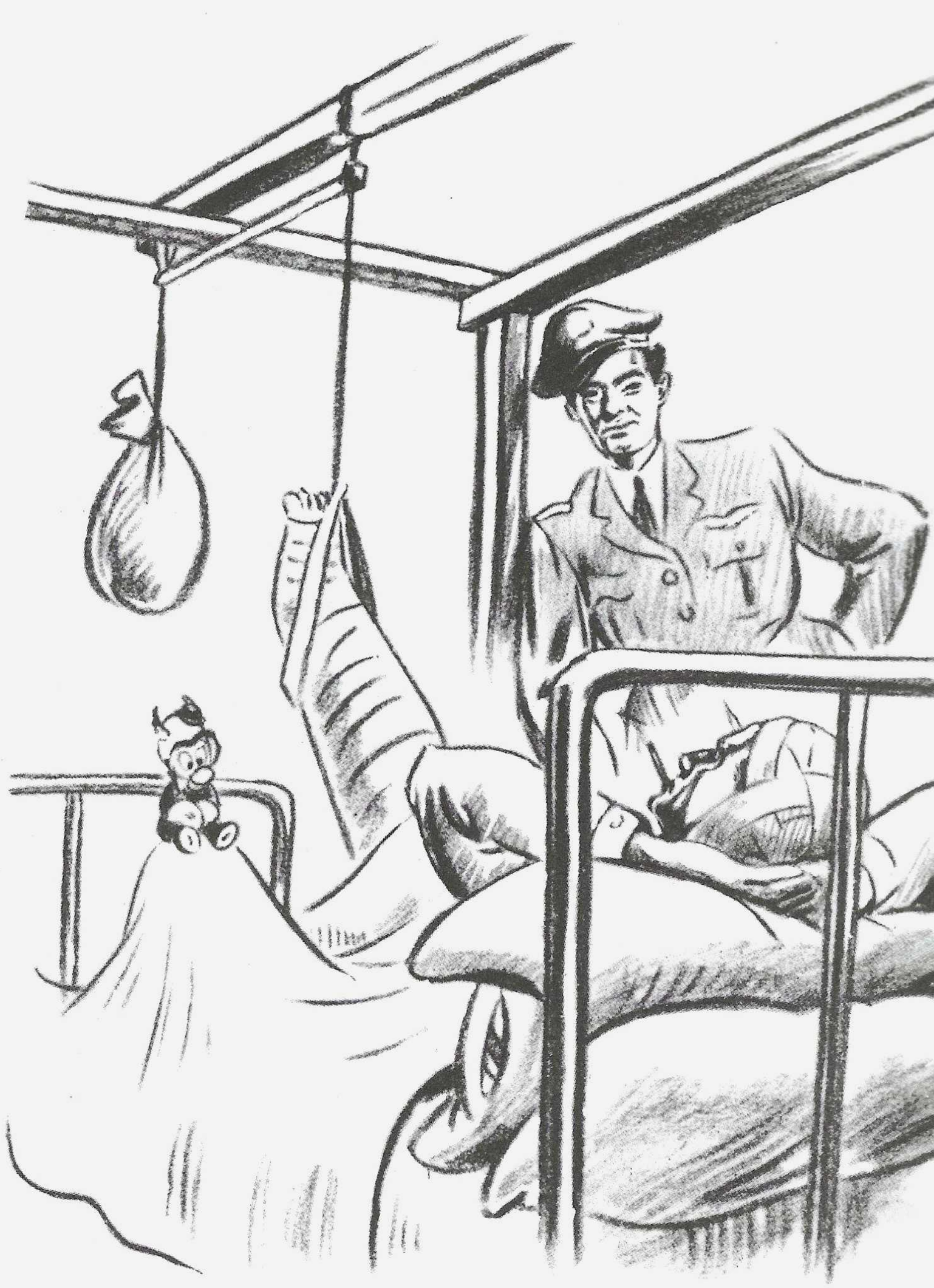
He saw exactly what happened. He saw the gremlins in their thousands lined up all around the edge of the landing field, and he saw them watching him and waiting their chance. He saw them, at the last moment, when it was too late to do anything about it, pick up the complete field and carry it away on their shoulders, running faster than the wind. Because they were all athletic types, they wore little white running shorts with a blue stripe down one side; instead of regulation suction boots they had on spiked patent-leather running shoes. They ran for a hundred yards and stopped, and the chief athletic gremlin said,

"Mind your toes, down she goes. Mind your toes, down she goes. One-two-three, down!" And they dropped it and ran away into a nearby wood.

When Gus landed, the runway was still a hundred yards away.

Stuffy, watching from the distance, knew exactly what had happened.





Gus languished in a hospital for many weeks. He lay in a small, dark room, with his right leg in a long splint.

All the time Gremlin Gus sat on the bed rail above his head and kept watch.

All the men from his squadron came to visit him, and the tales they had to tell about the work of the gremlins were harrowing indeed.

At night the gremlins would move the flare path over to an adjacent field; they pushed whole mountains up into the clouds; they altered the position of marker beacons at night and of familiar landmarks by day.

Then Gus spoke up, slightly muffled by bandages:

"Look here, fellows. You may think I've been wasting my time all these weeks in the hospital—but I haven't. I've given the gremlin problem the most serious thought, and I think I've found the answer. We've been neglecting our duty—listen." And while the boys gathered round, Gus outlined in great detail his plans for the first Gremlin Training School.

Three days later the G.T.S. was in operation, and Jamface put up a large sign outside Number One Hangar which read: GREMLIN TRAINING SCHOOL.

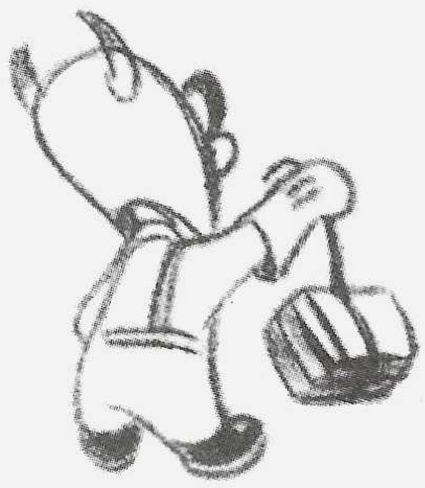
The gremlins had to take two separate courses of training. In the right-hand corner of the hangar there was a large sign which said INITIAL TRAINING SCHOOL, and in the left-hand corner was another equally large one which said ADVANCED TRAINING SCHOOL.

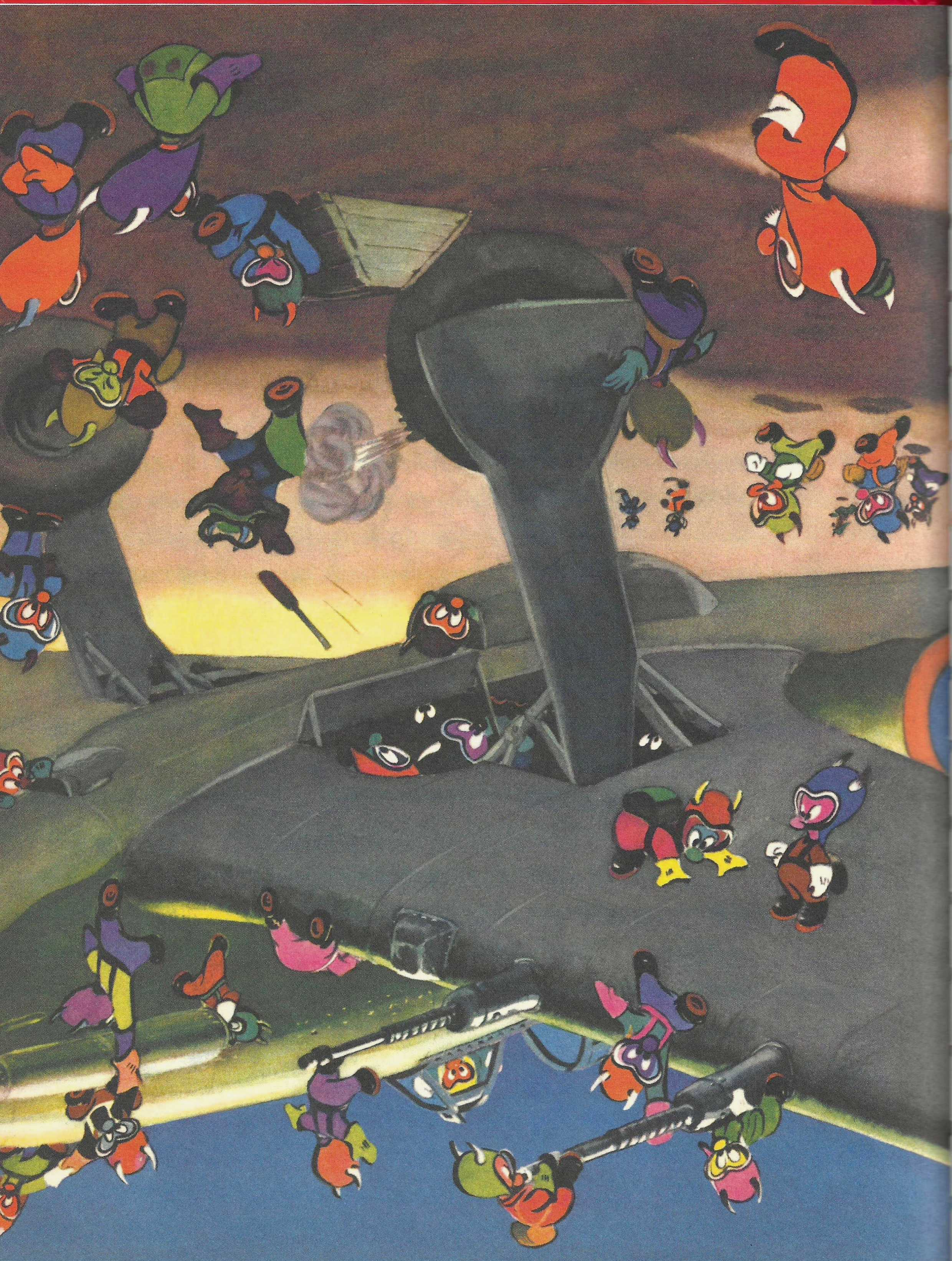
Gremlin Gus was brought from the hospital and put in sole charge of Initial Training School. He worked from morning till night, trotting around and around, supervising and helping and scolding and encouraging.

The first thing the gremlins saw when they entered the school was a rather ancient plane, and on its fuselage were painted in large red letters the words DO NOT TOUCH. With a whoop they all rushed forward, clambered onto the machine, and immediately set to work boring holes in the wings, messing about with the engine, and doing all those things which cause pilots so much trouble. But they got a rude shock.

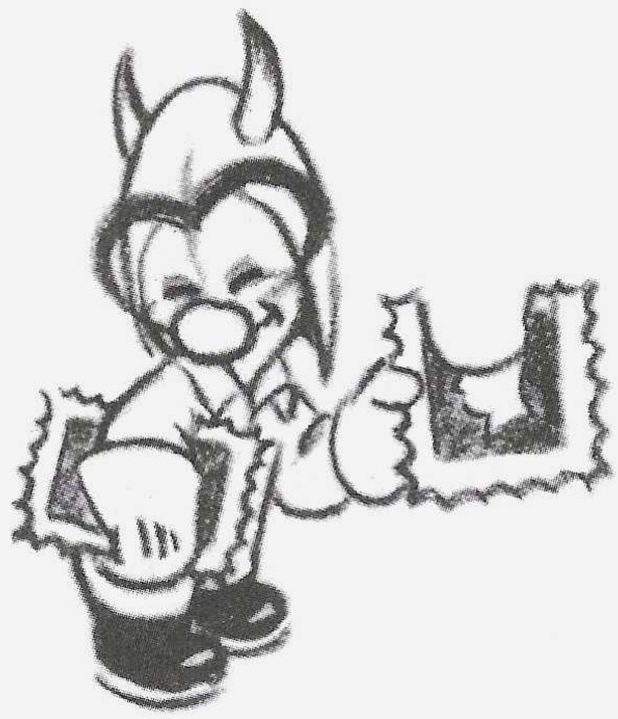
Just as soon as a gremlin started boring a hole in the fuselage, a stream of old engine oil would shoot out and hit him in the face.

Each wire a gremlin touched was carrying enough current to give him a nasty shock! If one started jumping about on the wings, he shot through a secret trap door into a bucket of green paint, cleverly placed just below.





This ruined his clothes, and gremlins are particularly sensitive about their dress. He was usually so infuriated and humiliated that he resolved there and then never to jump up and down on the wings any more.



The process of training in I.T.S. went on this way until finally the gremlins were cured of all their misdeeds. This was all very well so far as it went, but of course it was not enough. The gremlins had now been taught not to be bad anymore, but they hadn't been taught to be good. For the time being they became negative gremlins.

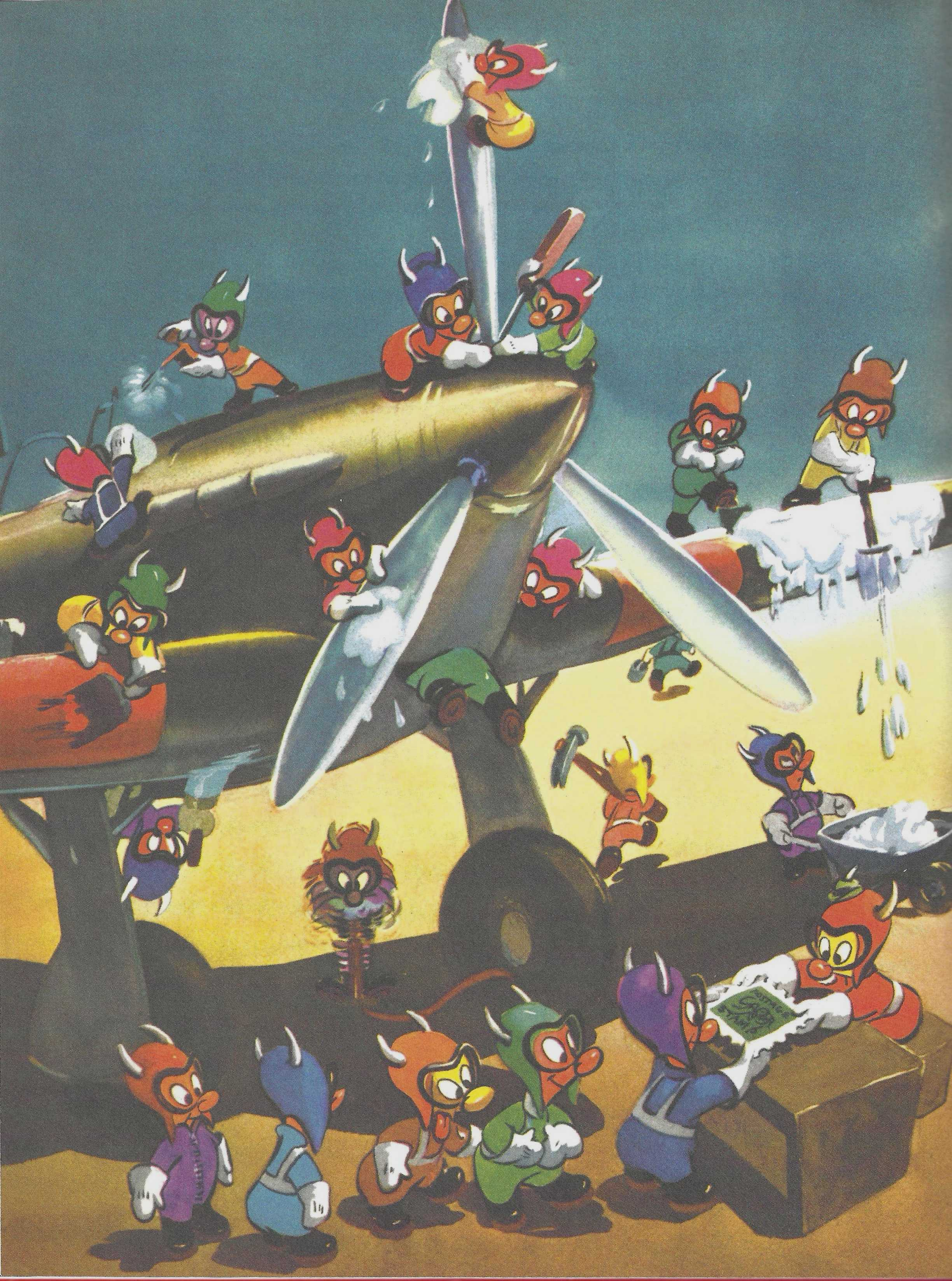
But they were now ready for the Advanced Training School, where Gremlin Jamface was in charge.

In A.T.S. there was another old plane, but this one was very broken down. Everything was either bent, or cracked, or torn; there was ice on the wings and mist on the windshield. Gremlin Jamface went around with a satchel of used postage stamps slung over his shoulder, encouraging all the gremlins to go to it and repair the machines.

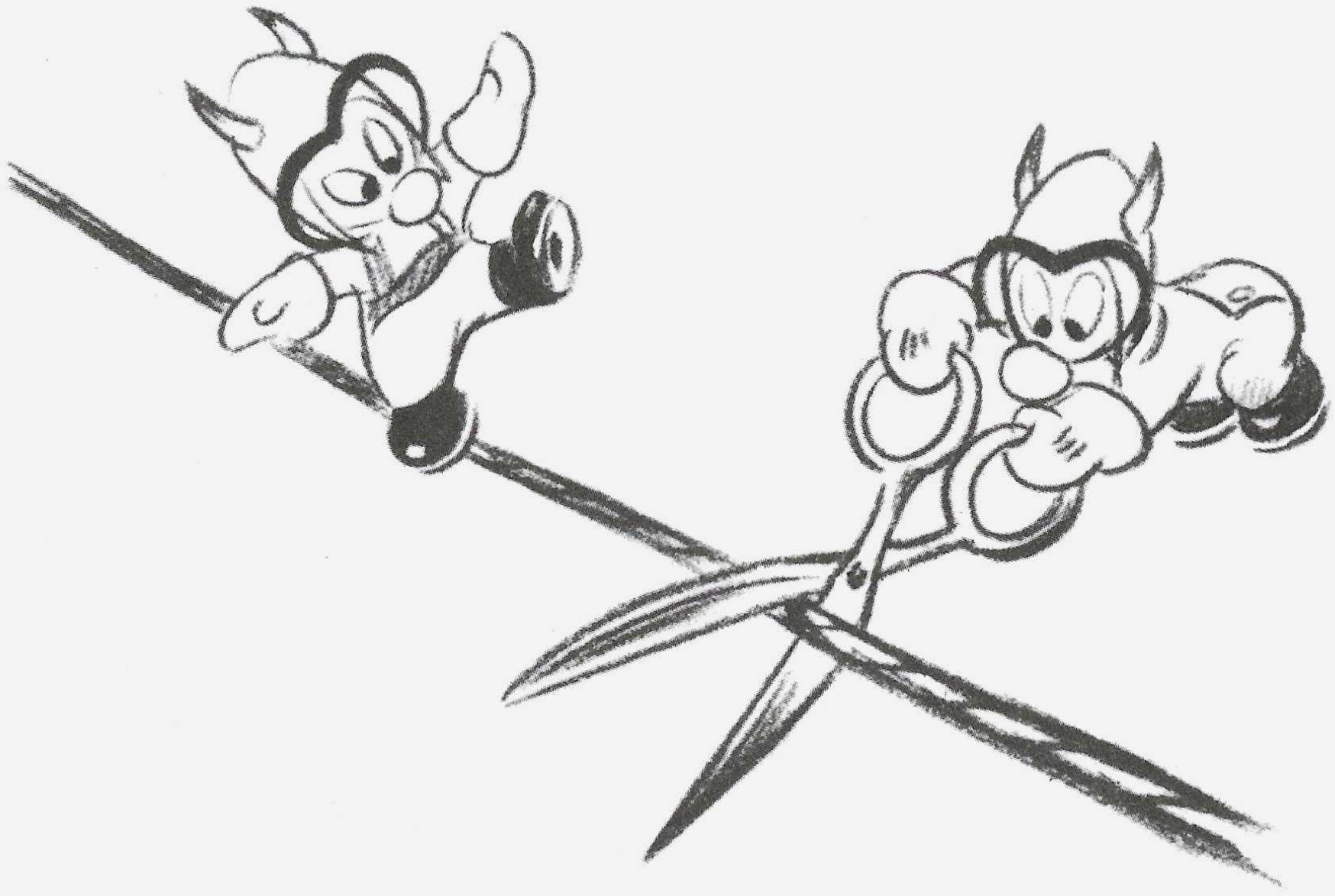
Delighted with the prospect of getting some of their favorite food, they set to work immediately. They wiped the windshields and de-iced the wings. They straightened the propeller blade. They mended the punctures and sewed up tears. They stopped the leaks and blocked up the holes, and each time they did a little job, Gremlin Jamface came around and gave them a used postage stamp. Every now and then, when he thought no one was looking, he would pop one into his own mouth. He did this a great many times during the course of the day, with the result that he always had indigestion.

After working hard for a time in A.T.S. the gremlins began to find that it was rather nice always to be doing good and useful things, and in the end they were glad to work just for the fun of it. They were good gremlins.

And so the Gremlin Training School continued to flourish, and in a very short time the news of its success spread to other R.A.F. stations where gremlin trouble was being experienced—to bomber squadrons in the South, to fighter squadrons guarding the towns in the Midlands, and to squadrons of the Coastal Command on remote islands off northern Scotland.



They rounded up all their bad gremlins and put them in little wooden boxes with holes on top and sent them down to the Gremlin Training School in care of their squadron Intelligence Officer. The school grew bigger and bigger and more and more famous.



Just after Christmas Gus came out of the hospital and returned to his squadron. But it was not the same Gus as before. He walked with a slight limp, and the medicos had dashed his fondest hope by saying that he would never be able to fly again. To a pilot, being alive but earthbound is worse than not being alive at all.

The weeks went by, and before anyone knew it spring had come.

But spring brought no hope to poor Gus. Three times he failed to pass his medical exam.

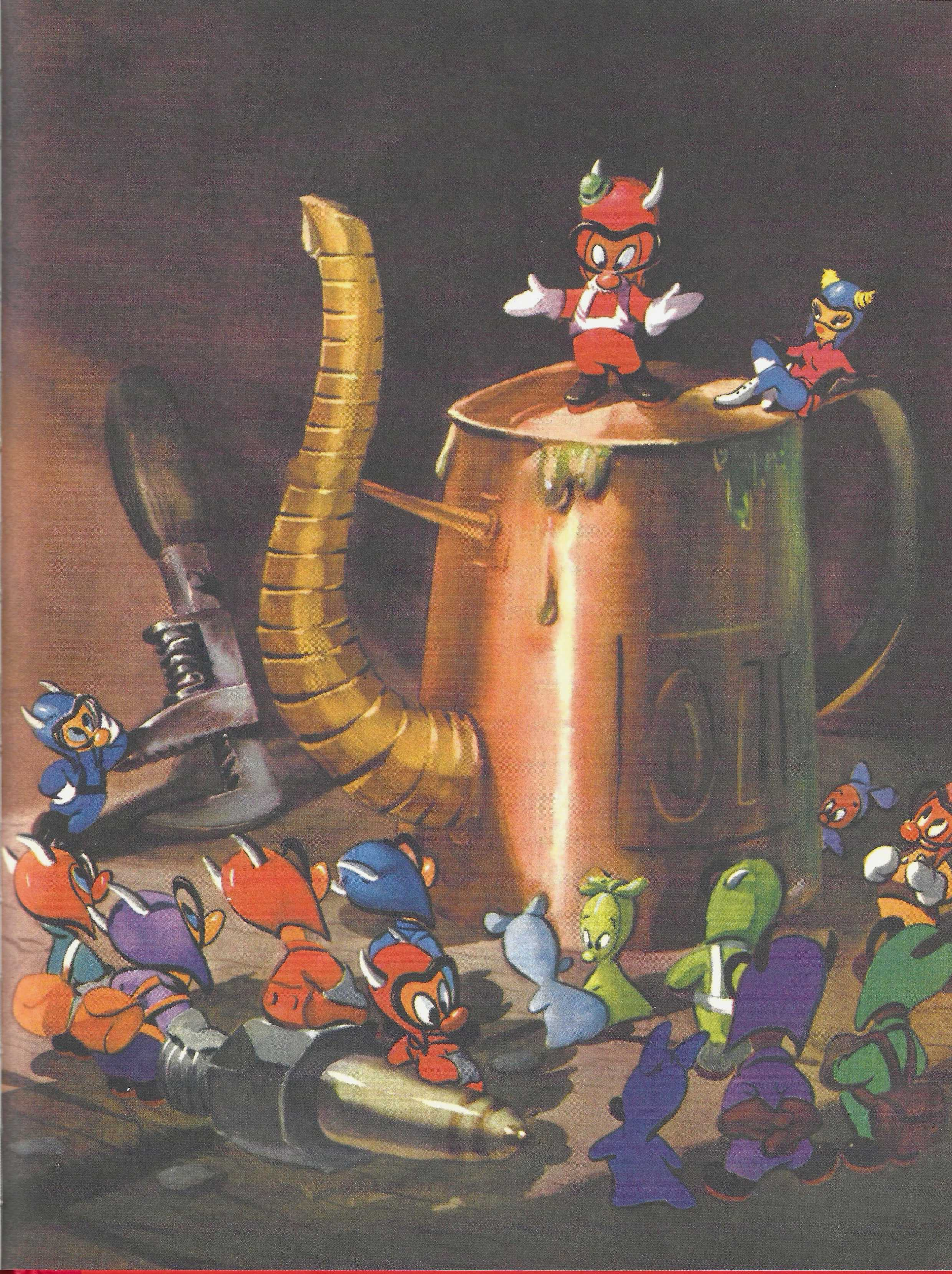
The news traveled over the airdrome to the gremlins, who were very sorry for Gus, and they all scratched their bald little heads, wondering how they could help.

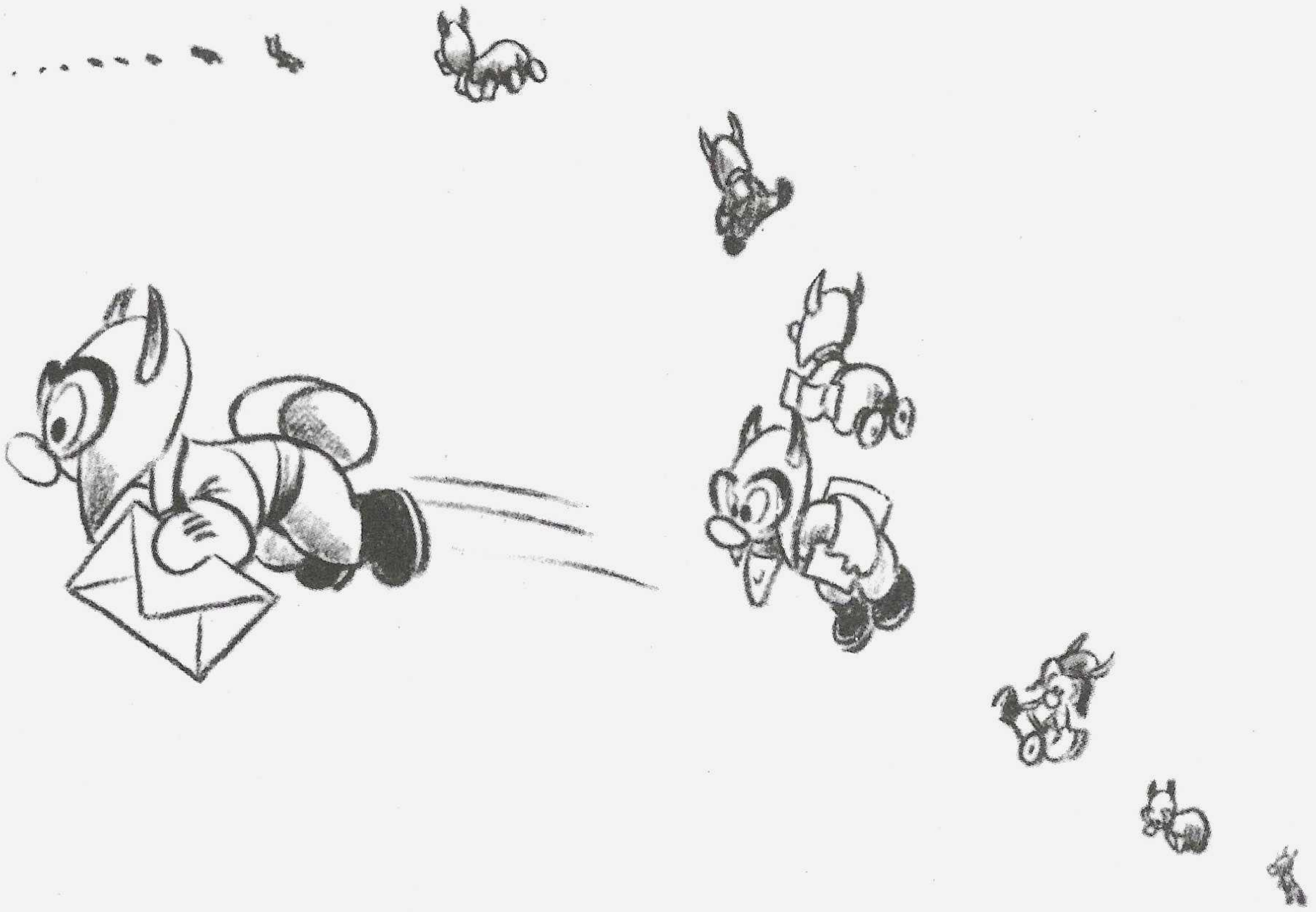
Gremlin Gus himself summoned a conference of the tribe, and all sorts of ideas and suggestions were put forward. But none of them was any good, and the meeting was just about to break up when a little man in the back row, who was called Gremlin Griff, stood up and asked,

"Why don't we tell him to ask for another medical exam? Then we could all go along and help him to get through."

Gremlin Gus jumped up and clapped his hands and said that was a wonderful idea and ran away as fast as his legs would carry him to tell his master.

Gus was delighted, and rushed off to the medico and told him that he was suddenly feeling much better, and could he please have another medical exam.

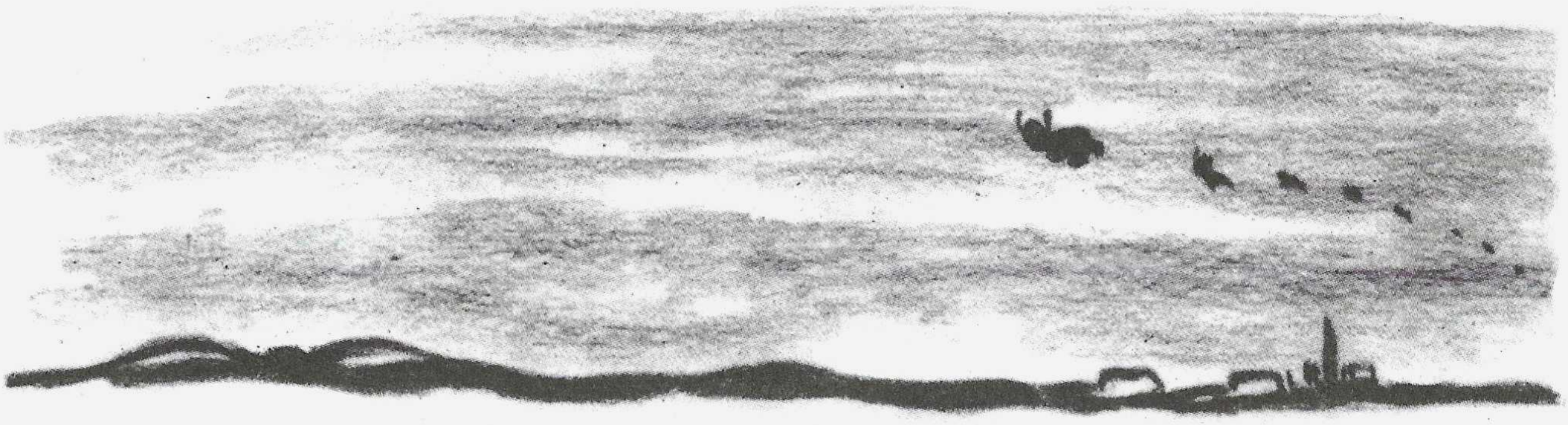


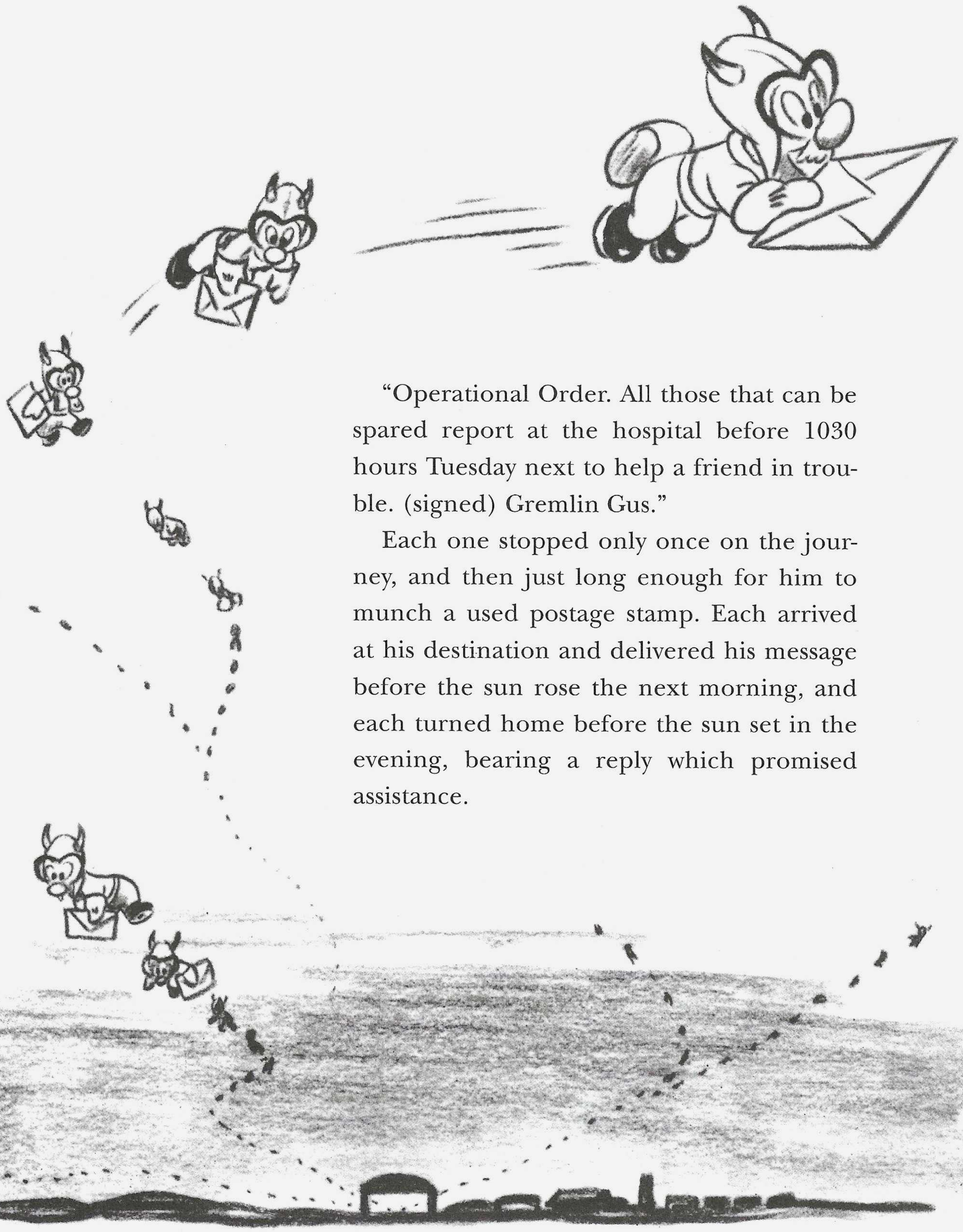


"You only had your last one the other day," said the medico.

But Gus said that didn't matter. He said that all of a sudden he had begun to feel so much better that he was quite sure that he'd made an amazing recovery. So the medico, who understood pilots very well, said, "All right, come along at ten-thirty next Tuesday morning." He knew he wouldn't get any peace otherwise.

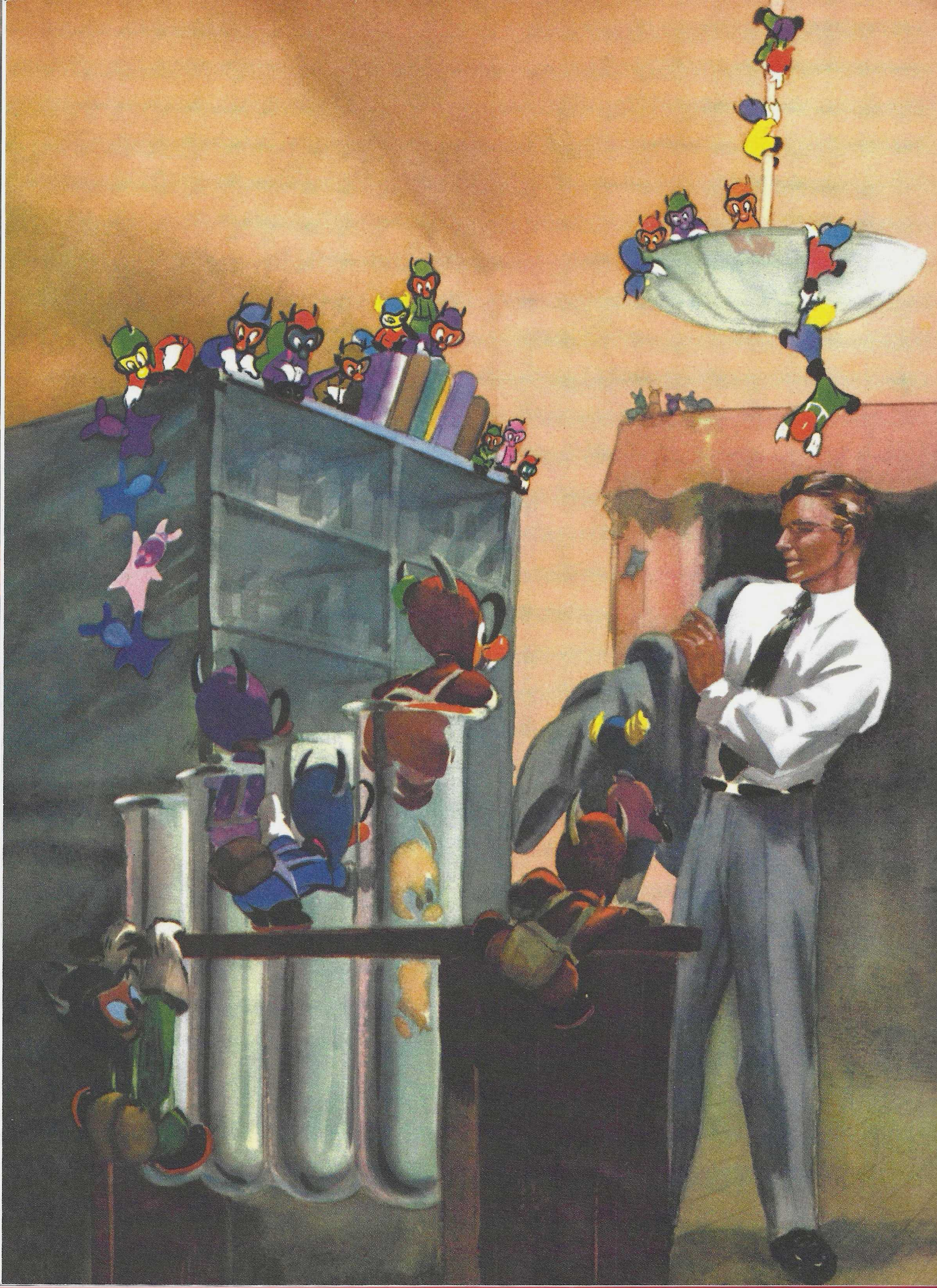
So everything was arranged. All that day and far into the night a stream of little couriers (who were reformed athletic gremlins, using their strength and endurance to good purpose) flowed out of the airdrome bearing the news to the good gremlins in every other squadron in the country. They each carried with them a little note, which read:





"Operational Order. All those that can be spared report at the hospital before 1030 hours Tuesday next to help a friend in trouble. (signed) Gremlin Gus."

Each one stopped only once on the journey, and then just long enough for him to munch a used postage stamp. Each arrived at his destination and delivered his message before the sun rose the next morning, and each turned home before the sun set in the evening, bearing a reply which promised assistance.



The day fixed for Gus's medical dawned bright and clear.

The gremlins were assembling in the hospital, but of course no one could see them.

Gremlins, fifinellas, and widgets crowded the examination room in their hundreds. They perched on the pictures and ranged themselves along the bookshelves; they hung from the lamps and crowded the table; still more squatted on the floor crosslegged in neat little rows.

Naturally the medico didn't see them; only pilots and navigators and air-gunners and people who fly can see those things.

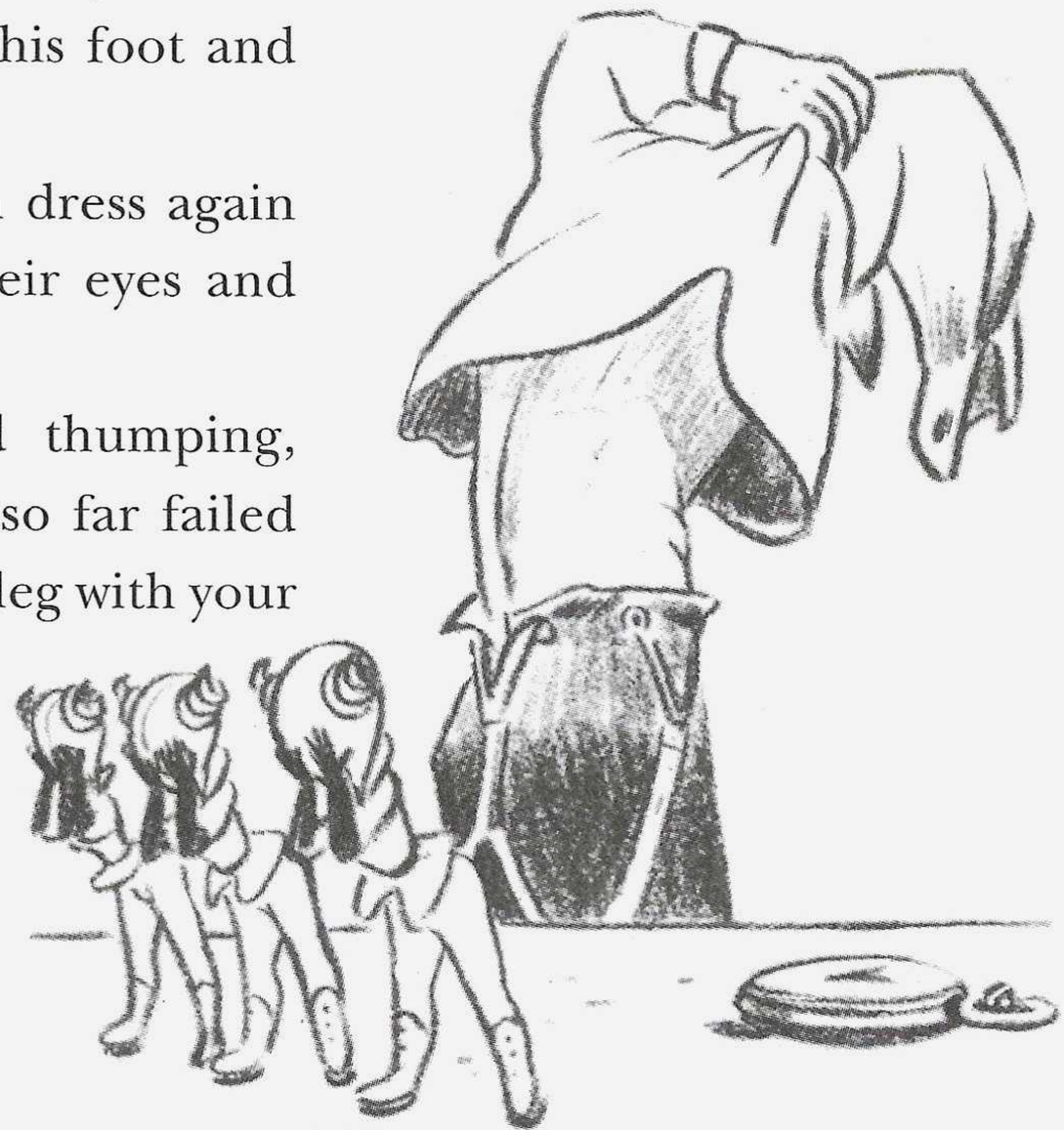
Then the examination began, and the medico said, "Jump up and down on that chair ten times and then let me feel your pulse." Gus jumped up and down and then gave the medico his wrist. He knew his pulse was going too fast and he could hear his heart beating great hammer-blows in his chest. But immediately a gremlin hurried forward, gently lifted the medico's finger off the wrist, and tapped it with a little mallet, at first a bit faster than normal, then quickly slowing down to a steady 72 to the minute.

"Very good," said the medico, and noted it down on a sheet of paper. "And now, will you take off your shirt." And all the fifinellas turned around, covering their eyes with their hands.

The gremlins watched intently while the medico tested Gus's heart and thumped his back. Whenever there was any sign of trouble, one or two would run forward and put matters right. When the medico tapped Gus's knee to make his leg jump, as they always do on these occasions, six gremlins got behind his foot and gave a little push at the right moment.

"Very good," said the medico. "You can dress again now." And all the fifinellas uncovered their eyes and turned around once more.

Then, after a lot more tapping and thumping, came the big test, the one that Gus had so far failed every time. It consisted of standing on one leg with your

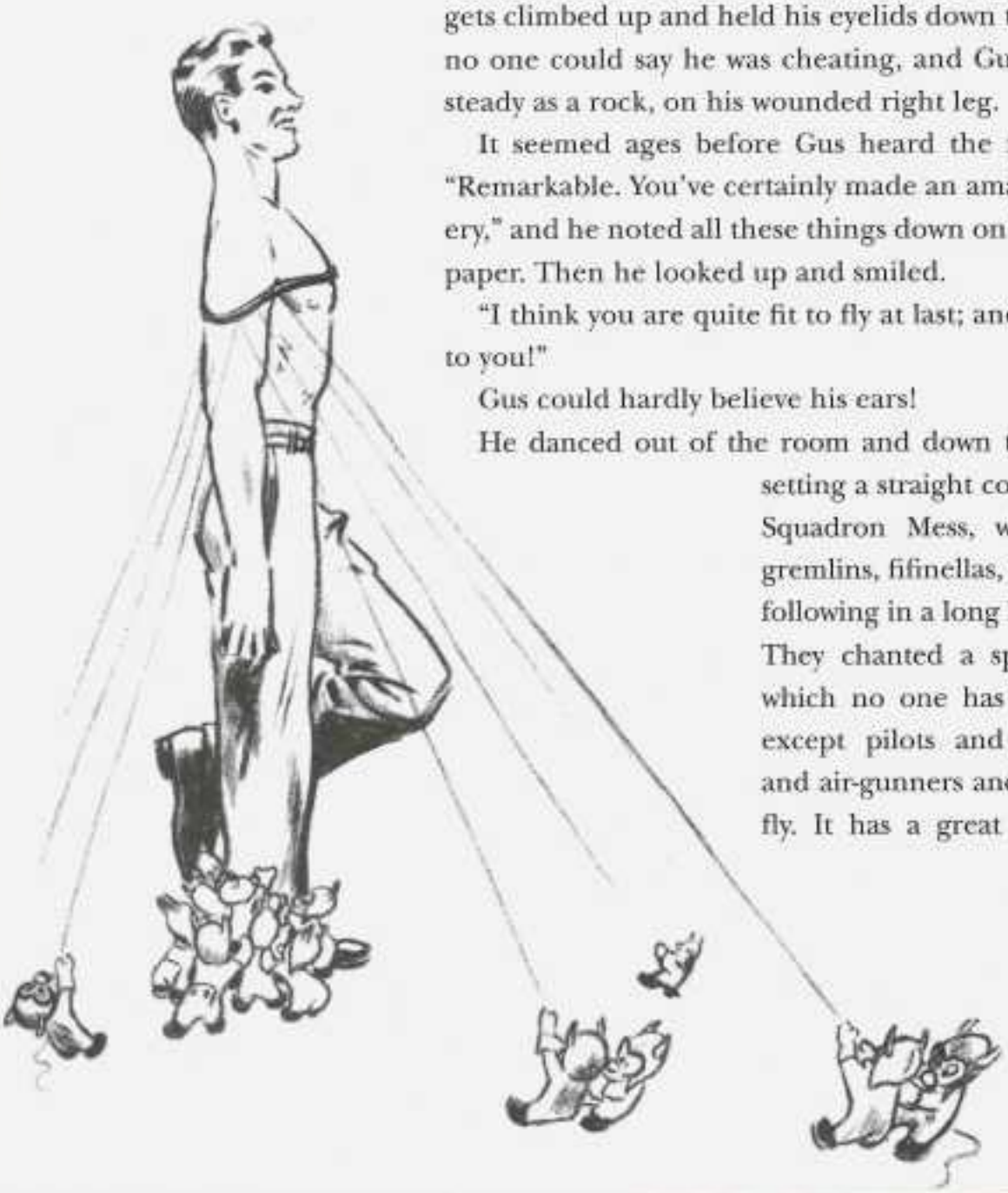


eyes shut and balancing there for a period without falling over. Gus was all right on his left leg, but the right one, with a couple of bullet wounds in it, was not what it had been.

"Shut your eyes tight and balance on your right leg and stay there until I tell you to stop," said the medico.

This was the moment that poor Gus had been dreading.

Immediately every gremlin and every fifinella rushed to his assistance. They stood on each other's shoulders and held up his left foot; they formed a solid wall around his right leg and braced it from all sides; they attached little ropes to his shoulders and pinned him to the ground, making him rigid and steady as a tentpole. Two widgets climbed up and held his eyelids down tight so that no one could say he was cheating, and Gus balanced, steady as a rock, on his wounded right leg.



It seemed ages before Gus heard the medico say, "Remarkable. You've certainly made an amazing recovery," and he noted all these things down on his sheet of paper. Then he looked up and smiled.

"I think you are quite fit to fly at last; and good luck to you!"

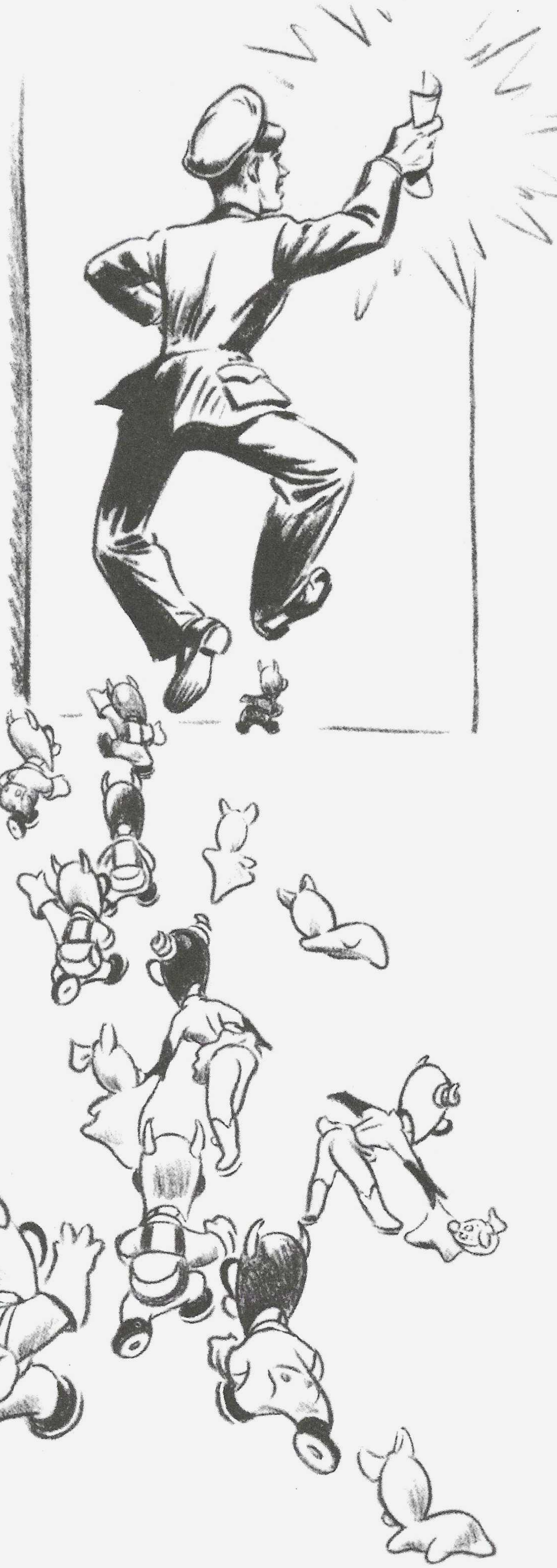
Gus could hardly believe his ears!

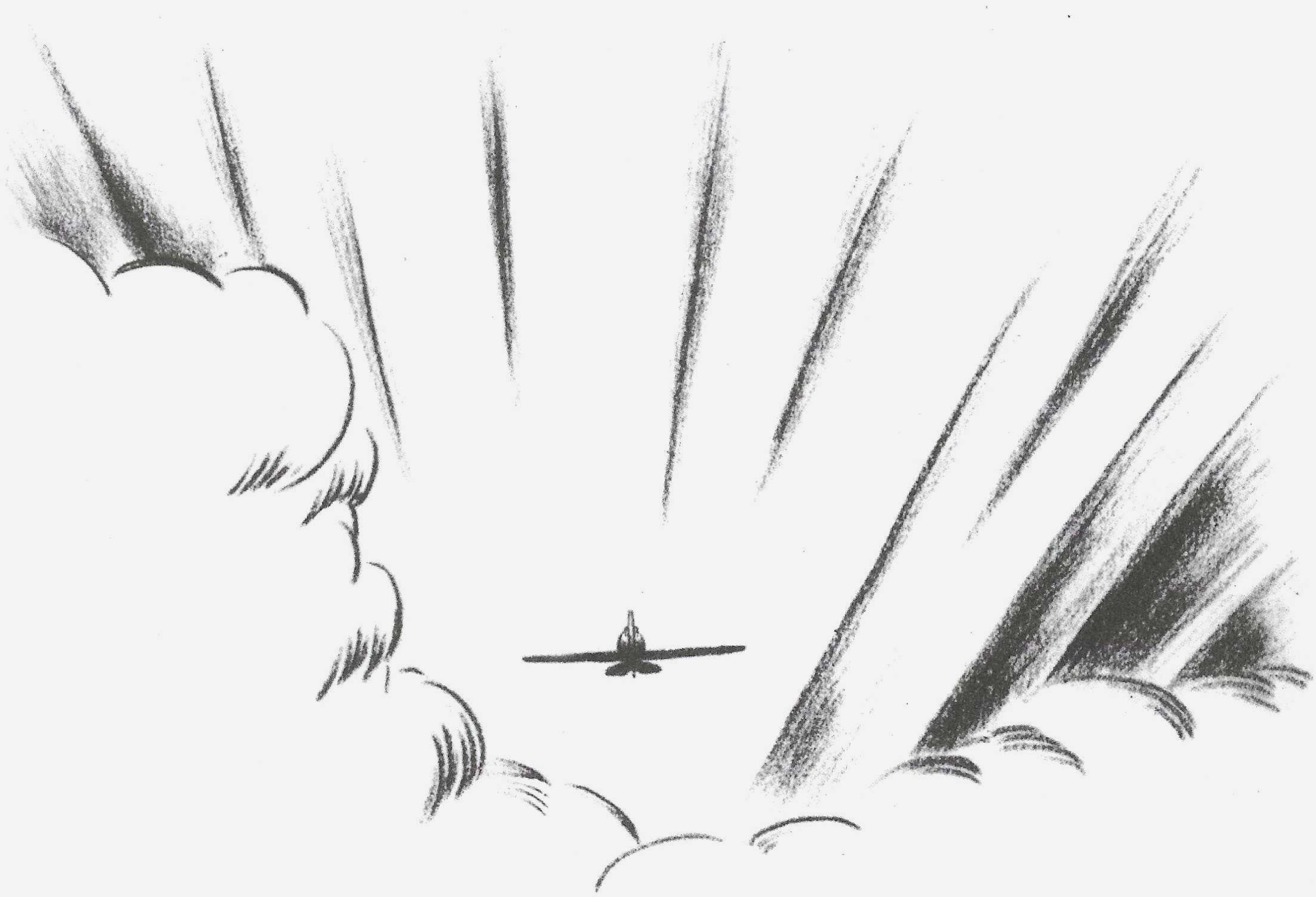
He danced out of the room and down the passage, setting a straight course for the Squadron Mess, with all the gremlins, fifinellas, and widgets following in a long line behind. They chanted a special song, which no one has ever heard except pilots and navigators, and air-gunners and those who fly. It has a great number of

verses; and, as they sing, the gremlins hop from one leg to another in time with the rhythm:

*Wipple Scrumpet in the sky,*
*Wipple Scrumpet in the sky,*
*Pilots all were born to fly*
*Higher than the highest high—*
*Wipple Scrumpet in the sky.*

The gremlins danced far into the night and feasted upon used postage stamps until the small hours, and above the sounds of their revelry was heard the voice of Gus as he sang many songs and toasted his small benefactors with many tankards of good strong ale.

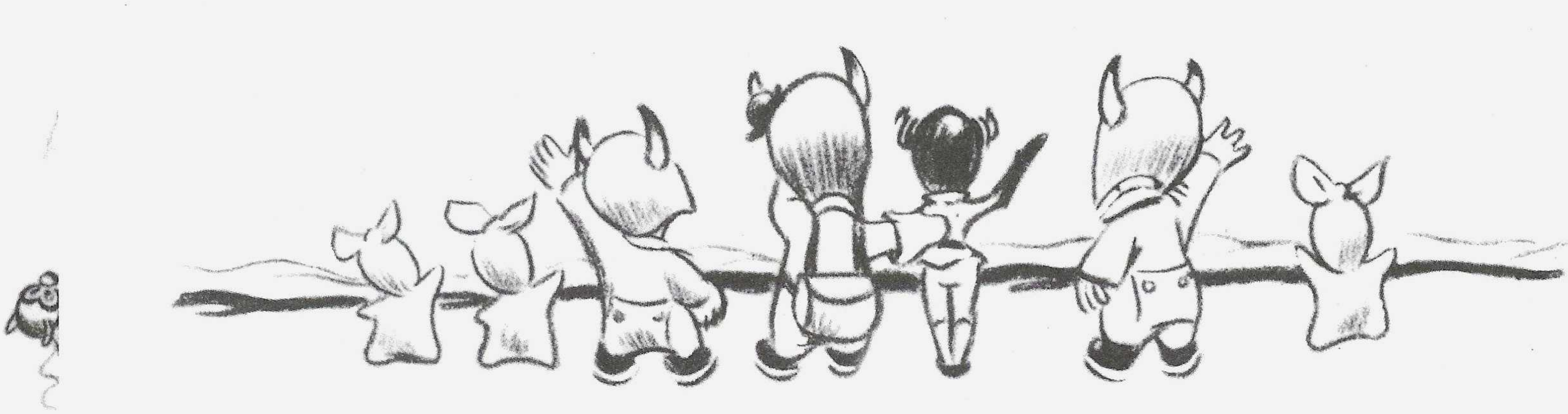


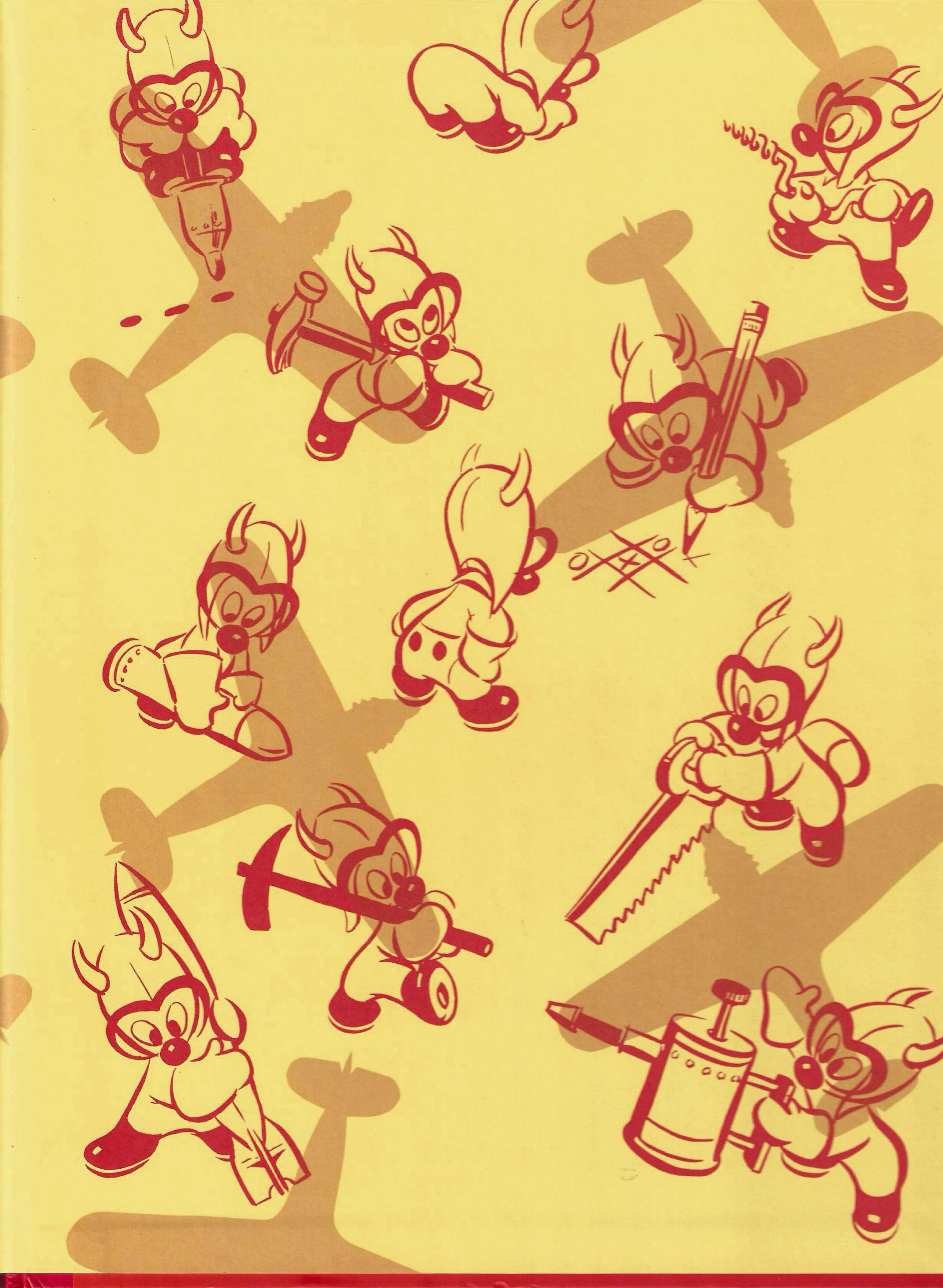


And so, with the help of the gremlins, and because he had great faith and determination, a pilot was able to return to his flying. But he was only one of many hundreds who since then have come to know and understand the truth about these little people; who have learned to love them, to fear them, and to respect them.

He is, indeed, an unhappy man who goes up into the sky to fight saying,

"I do not believe in gremlins."





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